

Fallout Equestria: Heroes

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Synopsis

Inspired by the heroics of the mysterious mare known as the Stable Dweller, Silver Storm, a guard of the town of Marefort, decides to go on a daring mission to rescue her captured brother. Of course things rarely go as planned and her attempts at heroism drags her into a tangled web of plots and conspiracies as warring factions vie for control over the last great city: Dise.

Prologue

War... war never changes. Somepony told me that once. Somepony old, I think, given the vagueness and wiseness of the statement. I didn't know if it was true. I wasn't a very smart pony, but it seemed to me war changed often. Long ago, ponies fought hoof to hoof or with sharpened spears. When iron was found and molded, ponies fought with blades: in their mouth, with telekinesis, or strapped to wings. Before long, we figured out how to shoot things at each other without the use of magic, and not long after magic and science were combined into balefire bombs. When the bombs finally fell, it should have been the end of war, but ponies survived long enough to fight wars after the apocalypse.

We're resourceful like that.

I stared across the vast, empty expanse and sighed. Besides killing almost everything, the balefire bombs had the unfortunate effect of turning everything *brown*. I'd once imagined the entirety of the Equestrian wasteland was a shit taken by a lazy god who hadn't bothered to clean it up. Either that or it was some sort of cosmic joke. The bright and colourful coats of the inhabitants contrasted the brown and dreary landscape; there was probably something profound about that. The fact that my job was to watch out for signs of an attack, which could happen at any time, was proof of the sick nature of ponies. Don't let our pretty manes fool you.

“And that's the news. This has been DJ PON-3, bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts,” the PipBuck on my foreleg boomed. I'd got it years ago from a trading caravan but could never get anything but the radio to work. The way it wrapped around my leg like some Old-World magi-tech armour made me feel almost as tough as I looked. If a would-be raider wasn't scared enough by the rifle on my battle saddle, they might just think I was the 'Wasteland Saviour' (who was known to wear a PipBuck). Yes, I looked just like a dragon slayer. Maybe a baby dragon... if it was blind and deaf.

“You still list'nin' to that?” a voice drawled behind me. “And here I was thinkin' we finally turned ya off it.” Its owner trotted toward me. Red was her coat and red was her mane, paired with the deepest green eyes I had ever seen. “He's a liar and a cunt. Ain't no good fight but survival.” With a flick of her curly mane she grinned at me.

I pointed my rifle at her, my mouth closing into the trigger bridle. “Now you're starting to look like a raider to me,” I said, flat as I could.

“Hon, you couldn't hit the sea if you were swimmin'. You ever shot that thing before?” Ignoring my threat, she cantered closer, stopping only to wink seductively.

“Cans behind Marefort.” In truth, I hadn't practised in months, but I'd always been a crack shot. “Smaller than your head. Further away, too.”

“Now hon, what would you do without me?” Before I could really say much of anything she was nuzzling my neck gently; I could feel my face burn. I pushed her away with both hooves and turned back to my desolate wasteland. “So you like it rough?” I turned nearly as red as her mane.

“I'm on guard.”

My guardhouse was a dilapidated shack with only two and a half walls to its name that barely stood on its cliff-side perch, built from the remains of a carriage. It had a roof though, and when the rains came, I was thankful for that.

Popping up beside me and completely ignoring my protests, she peered into the brown... brownness. “I

don't think those dead trees and rocks are going anywhere.”

“I'm not watching rocks.”

“That's all that is out there, hon.”

I flushed again. Somehow she always made me feel even stupider.

“Come on. Nobody will miss you,” she purred. “It wont take long...”

“... and you know I'm not into mares,” I didn't turn my head to look at her, ‘cause if I did I knew she'd laugh; she was forever laughing at me. “And for that matter neither are you.” For all her flirting with everything she saw, I had never known her to go beyond that. Then again, I was well known for not noticing the world around me when I wasn't at my post.

“Eh.” She shrugged, sitting on her haunches. “I'll try anything once.Or twice.” She smiled enigmatically at me.

Yeah. That was not going to happen.

“Try somewhere else. I have rocks to guard.”

A unicorn pony could use their magic to float binoculars up to their face; being an earth pony, I had to nail my pair to a rotating swivel on the north half-wall-barrier-thing that faced... uh, north. The only real travel-able road from the north was a rutted trail weaving between high hills on either side. A dangerous trek that lasted for miles, and ambush could happen at any turn. I could see it all from my shack on its perch atop the highest cliff for miles. Anypony coming from the north, or goddess forbid east or west, I would see well before they got to Marefort, and only a fool would try coming from the south.

South was where Smooth Tongue and his raiders 'The Crimson Hoof' made their base, in one of the old Stables.

“I'm bored, and Mayor Mare seems to think I'm distracting the counting girls.”

I sighed, thinking of the kind of distracting she was doing.

“Your watch isn't for another three hours.”

“I'll wait.” She nudged herself dangerously close. “You don't mind, do you?” She purred in that sultry tone that was damn near impossible to say no to. “I knew you'd see it my way.”

I wondered briefly what she'd look like riddled with holes. No, that was too gruesome. As much as I wanted to smack her, she did make the endless brown waste slightly less boring.

“You know you're the only pony that doesn't sleep through your watches, right?” I didn't bother to acknowledge her.

“Don't know why we even bother watching...” She continued on, oblivious. I was more concerned with DJ PON-3 droning on about a toaster repair pony than I was with Wildfire's ramblings. “Only raiders that come 'round these parts are killed long before they get within ten miles of Marefort. The Crimson Hoof sees to that.”

“The Crimson Hoof are raiders,” I said blankly. I watched a molerat fight a bloatsprite in the distance. Dimly, I wondered which one was the predator and which the prey.

She shrugged her dainty shoulders. “They protect us.”

... and in exchange we give them all the ammo in Marefort. Given it was built in an old army warehouse, we had ammo aplenty. Enough for an army bigger than any that existed. Every few years or

so somepony would stumble upon a new cache, and trade would continue. With it we bought protection and food and medicine. But only from the Crimson Hoof and those the Smooth Tongue let on their lands. Without them, Marefort would be able to thrive, but with them we didn't burn. I wasn't sure if it was a fair trade, but it was close enough that no pony complained.

“And besides, without them I'd actually have to stay awake during my watches. I so enjoy my beauty sleep.”

Her beauty sleep was clearly effective. It was not for nothing she was called the hottest mare in Marefort.

“And I enjoy the radio.”

She was also the most talkative.

“What, hon, am I drowning it out? Silly me. I should just stop talkin' and let ya get on with listenin' to your propaganda.”

I rolled my eyes and shot her half a glance. I knew she was just trying to get a rise out of me, but it was difficult not to say something.

“It is not propaganda.” Once again I was not a very smart pony.

“Sure it is. Look, here he goes on 'bout how some great hero bloodied Red Eye's nose *and* managed to increase her radio signal. No pony is that good. Either he's lying, or Celestia has come again. Far as I can figure he's up to starting a revolution. A new world order where what he says goes.”

That was just stupid. Even for me. A revolution needed somepony in power to be revolted against, and there was no such pony. Every town had its leader, and most leaders bowed to some local warlord, slaver, or raider tribe. If DJ-PON-3 wanted to start a revolution he'd first need to create a large governing body to be usurped.

At least, I was pretty sure that was how revolutions worked.

“Whatever.”

“You could try arguing.” She huffed, disappointed.

“No thanks.” No doubt if I tried she'd make me seem the fool... Not that she wasn't doing that already.

“Do you really believe there's a pony out there doing good? Rescuing slaves, killing raiders, and kissing foals? That in this,” she waved a hoof towards my brown rocky wasteland, “there's a hero?” She smiled and then laughed when I didn't deign to answer. “Ain't no heroes no more,” she said sweetly. “If there was, they'd be killed quicker than I can spit. You're better off listening to silence.”

“Are you done?”

“Why yes, hon.”

“Good.” There was no point arguing. As pretty as she was, I knew the sadness behind her eyes could not be reasoned with.

When we were just fillies, we stumbled across a cache of strange ammunition. When I looked at it, the colour shifted before my eyes like shadows dancing in candle light. First purple, then blue, always waving and changing. Mayor Mare, the first Mayor Mare anyway, called it Starmetal. When the Crimson Hoof came the Mayor refused to give up the ammo; said it was too dangerous. Smooth Tongue killed her himself. She was my mother, and he killed her. When Wildfire's father tried to step in, they killed him too. Then for good measure they took my brother as a slave and were on their way. I tried to comfort Wildfire, but she just pushed me away. She said she understood why they did what they

did, survival of the fittest or some such. She'd refused to talk about it since.

Then again, I never did ask a second time.

So to her there were no heroes. Only fools and them what kill fools. This "Saviour of the Wastes" was just another fool. Couldn't say she was wrong. If half of what DJ-PON3 said was right, she was more than a bit of a fool. Then again so was I, and she had managed to do more good as a fool than I ever had. So I listened and prayed that one day she would come to Marefort. That she would kill the Crimson Hoof for what they did and give us freedom to trade and prosper.

Wildfire chatted beside me, almost completely unaware that I wasn't listening. It was gossip mostly: who as dating who, which of our scavengers hadn't come back, news about the outside world she got from traders and caravans -- things I never bothered to care about. All that mattered to me was doing my job, living, and maybe fantasizing about the Crimson Hoof's bloody demise. Schoolyard murmurs mattered little to me. Some ponies said I never paid attention to anything not two feet in front of me, and that was almost nearly true, save for the rocks I was guarding, of course.

"Marigold is sleeping with Nos. I think Nos is smitten but, well, you know how Marigold is--" She stopped and turned to me. "Are you even listening?"

"No."

She sighed heavily at that and slowly got to her feet. "You should, maybe, pay attention. You're not going to get anywhere if you never see what's going on 'round you."

Somehow I doubted knowing who was dating whom would ever save my life, but I kept my disbelief to myself.

"Whatever." I saw a glint on the horizon. Lifting the binoculars to my eyes, I peered into the distance.

"A caravan."

That piqued my companion's interest. "Traders? Oh, how I love bartering."

No doubt; though I wasn't so certain we'd ever get to trade with them.

"How many?"

"Three carts." It seemed to me that they were a professional caravan, considering they had managed to train Bighorners to pull their waggons. I was curious as to what was inside those waggons to bring them all the way out here. "Maybe... a dozen ponies. It's hard to see... wait--" that couldn't be right, was that pony... flying? It had wings, and they even looked real.

"A pegasus." Pulling away, I saw Wildfire squinting into the distance.

"What?"

"You don't know what a pegasus is?"

I shook my head. What did she suspect? I was never very bright and cared little for history. "I thought they were just a myth. Winged earth ponies." The thing did a barrel roll and a loop as it scanned the horizon. No doubt it saw my little shack. "It's beautiful."

It wouldn't be for much longer.

"No flag." There was a brief flash of horror in her eyes, then acceptance. This was Crimson Hoof territory, and any trader that came through only did by their word. Those that could raised a flag showing that they had freedom to pass. If they didn't, then... I sent a warning shot echoing over the valley at the 'pegasus'. I could see the creature regarding me, and swooping in for a better look but it

failed to follow through when I didn't take another shot.

Decapitated heads on spikes marked the road, but the caravan paid no heed. An old billboard painted over with a red Hoof print. They ignored that too. They were begging to be killed.

"Celestia watch you and keep you safe,"

The sweet tone of Velvet Remedy blared from my PipBuck as a bullet shot through the pegasus' wing in a spray of blood.

"As you travel down the path you choose."

It was one of the newer songs, but I still found myself humming along as the pegasus tried to dive-bomb the ambush. Over a dozen Crimson Hooves by my count, and more storming over the hills from where they had been hiding.

"May Luna be with you and keep you strong, "

To the pegasus' eternal credit, it managed to take out one of its attackers before taking another hit and spiraling to the ground. It was around then that the rest of the traders took notice. Panicked, they scurried for weapons, ammo, and a place to hide.

"So your courage you will never lose. "

The traders managed to form a semi-circle barricade with the carts, as their attackers came swarming over the hills. For a second, I thought I saw a colt with the traders. I chose not to look for it further, in case it was true.

"Remain loyal, honest and brave, "

The traders' semi-circle exploded in a wave of blood and splinters so violent I felt the shock wave hit me in the chest like a hammer. Wildfire must have felt it too by the way she turned away and winced. Missiles were an unfair advantage for raiders... and I remember Marefort selling them to the raiders not days ago.

"Forget not the ones that you save,"

Miraculously, the pegasus pony had managed to get back up. Surrounded on all sides by hostile raiders, it put on a hell of a show. I watched as it took down two with its rifle before it jammed. The pony managed to pull out a spear and continue fighting despite multiple wounds. It was an impressive last stand, and like all last stands it eventually fell. Even as the pony was stabbed and shot to death, I felt nothing, not sadness or sickness or remorse. I had seen it all before.

"And in our hearts you will do no wrong..."

I turned away from my binoculars. I had seen enough. It was true what Wildfire said: I really could sleep through my watches. I figured they only made us hold watch so they could show off their strength on the off-chance we ever sought to rebel against them.

"Hmm." Wildfire had taken up looking at the carnage when I moved away. "Say, what did your brother look like?" I shot her a glare that could boil water. Meadow was not a topic that was discussed.

I answered anyway, "a Silver-grey coat, with a purple mane." I hadn't seen him since I was a filly and the damned raiders stole him from me, but I would never forget him. He was taller than most but skinny compared to my bulky frame. When we wrestled, I always let him win because he was older, though I could have beat him if I tried.

"He had a rose as a cutie mark right?" I shot my head up and turned to her. Something was not right

with her questioning, even I could figure that out. I nodded slowly. Her eyes studied my saddle, and gently she placed a hoof on my neck, and lead me to the binoculars.

Looking through, I saw a silver-grey pony with a purple mane and red-rose cutie mark showing under ripped barding. My brother. He was killing a helpless trader who'd survived the explosion.

They made him do it. I was sure of it. They'd kidnapped him and were forcing him to kill ponies. DJ PON-3 was reading the latest news as my head throbbed. Resting my head on the wall, I gritted my teeth and with a single kick shattered the binoculars into tiny pieces.

“This is insane!”

I ignored her protests. The inner armoury, where we kept all our best weapons and ammo, was locked by a heavy wood door. I bucked it open in one try. I was not pretty. In fact, I was bulkier than any pony in Marefort... but when you could buck anything that bugged you straight to the moon, who needed prettiness?

“You will *die*.”

I nodded numbly at Wildfire's protests. My hooves searched through boxes until I found the one I wanted. Flicking it open, I came face to face with the rifle of my dreams. Near twice as large as my current rifle, it fired rounds large enough to be used as bludgeons and its slick black coat made me positively wet. Designed for earth pony snipers, it had a scope I could flip over my right eye that was twice as powerful as the binoculars I smashed. I loved this rifle so much.

“Are you even listening? This is suicide. I-”

Unlatching my battle saddle, I went to work equipping the new weapon. It was hard work without unicorn magic, but we earth ponies were known for our stubbornness. I kept at it until it was good and stuck. Smiling at my own work, I lashed the saddle back on. It was much heavier, I realized, but not enough to make a difference to a pony of my size. I did a quick lap around the room to get used to it while Wildfire screamed obscenities. Only after I was done did I bother to reply.

“Be quiet or you'll wake the whole town.”

She face-hoofed as I grabbed a nearby pistol and placed it in a holster on my leg. If I was going to storm Stable 42, I couldn't rely on a single weapon, especially not one built for long ranges. Not being a unicorn pony made it difficult to switch between weapons, so I had to stick with the two.

It had been days since I saw him. The pounding in my head retreated to a dull throb, but I couldn't ignore it any longer. I knew what I had to do. If this “Hero of the Wastes” could free slaves by herself, then by the Goddess so could I. Maybe it was stupid; maybe I would die... but at least if I died I'd die doing something right for once. I had lived too long in apathy. It was time to make a difference. Even if the difference was only that one more corpse fed the ground.

“Silver...” she pleaded, “don't do this...” I almost wanted to call it off when I saw her eyes, red and sore with tears streaming down them. I nearly started crying too.

“I'm going.” I said after a long moment of silence.

“Then I'm going with you.” My friend clearly read too many stories if she was going to bust out that cliché. “And don't say ‘no’. Celestia knows we're going to get ourselves killed, but I can't in good conscience let ya go alone.”

I couldn't remember a time she'd ever cared for her conscience.

“No,” I said anyway.

“It's not up for debate.”

“No,” I repeated.

She stomped her hooves. “Yes, or I'll scream an' wake up the whole damn town.”

If they knew what I was planning they would never let me leave. The town, perhaps rightfully so, cared more for peace than it did justice.

“I... ” I was at a loss for words. Not that remarkable, considering how few I used. “Fine.” I sighed and turned away. Maybe she thought that this stunt would convince me to call it off, but that was never going to happen. If I was going to save my brother like I should have done years ago, and if she wanted to risk her neck for it, I couldn't very well say no.

She kissed my cheek, and I was quite thankful the room was dark enough to hide my blush. “Now that's a good girl.” After saving Meadow I was going to buck her into next week. Kick her, I mean! Kick.

“You know how to use a battle saddle, right?”

“You bite, and bullets come out.” A utilitarian and, ultimately, correct response. I motioned her for her to grab a saddle. When we were finally armed and armoured, I led the way into Marefort proper.

The warehouse was huge, a proclamation of earth pony ingenuity. Houses of old train cars and hammered-together shipping crates lined the walls, stacking against each other until they reached the roof of the huge building, bridges crossing between the levels. To outsiders it would seem a maze of stairs, ramps, bridges and stands that managed to fit more ponies in a small space than was seemingly possible. When I was a filly, I saw it as an endless game of tag made all the more fun by the off chance that the smallest misstep could possibly send me to my death. Today? I saw a midden heap of scared mares too frightened of their own shadows to come out of their precious warehouse and see the sunlight outside... or what counted for sunlight in the Wasteland.

I tiptoed my way around garbage and junk, doing my best to make no noise; the houses were small, barely more than a single bedroom, and their walls were thin. Eventually I crawled my way to the far side, and took my last look at Marefort. For its problems, ugliness, and crowdedness it was still my home. Home was not a thing you hear often in the Equestrian Wasteland, so it was something to remember. Even if it wasn't perfect.

Sighing, I turned back, never to see it again.

Outside the air was cool and crisp with the slightest taste of radiation. The facility had once held three massive warehouses and an office building, but all save Marefort had fallen to ruin. Surrounding everything was a large fence of chain link and wood, with guard towers every hundred meters or so. Most would be unmanned, and in those that were manned, the guards were probably asleep. Up on the high cliff overshadowing the entirety of the complex was my Guardhouse, shining a small light. They wouldn't be looking at me though. The guard house looked over the northern pass, and I was heading south.

I cast a longing glance at the ruins of the westernmost building. “That's where it happened.”

“What?” Wildfire had been uncharacteristically quiet.

“Where me and my brother found the blue bullets. *Starmetal*. The reason they took him. How this all started.” I didn't bother reminiscing. It'd only hurt. I'd had enough of looking at the past and wondering how I could change it. I was going to fix the future or die trying, and why not? Saviours seemed to be

popping up everywhere, and I was more than strong enough to throw my metaphorical hat into the metaphorical ring.

“Well.” Wildfire trotted up to me, way too close for comfort. “It's Hero Time.”

“Sniper...” Of course, they had a sniper.

It had taken a few hours trot to the cliffs leading to Stable 42: two high cliffs with a skinny ravine between, leading to the door, that lead to the door that lead to the old stable. A small guard house perched on top of the cliff that the stable was nestled in -- not too dissimilar to my old haunt. It overlooked the only viable path to the Crimson Hoof headquarters.

I ducked back behind a rock, Wildfire hunched beside me as, and motioned for her to stay down. She had been talking the whole trip, though thankfully in hushed tones. I really should never have brought her. She was a good shot, but never at another pony. She winced at the sight of blood, and she never much cared for anypony but herself. Why in Equestria she tagged along I'll never know.

A shot echoed. I would never get the chance to ask.

Blood. There was so much blood. I could feel my heart shatter as I hoisted Wildfire's lifeless body on my back. Celesita dammit, why did she look? Why couldn't she keep her thrice damned head DOWN!? Dammit dammit. I could hear the blood dripping from her wound onto the ground. I could smell it. Why did I take her, why was I such an idiot?

I turned to the sniper, the scope snapped up over my eye. I wouldn't give the murderer a chance to shoot again. I bit into the battle saddle so hard I thought I broke it. His head exploded into bloody chunks. I could still hear Wildfire bleeding.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

My whole body shook. I closed my eyes, blinking away tears. Maybe, just maybe, when I opened them Wildfire would be smiling at me. Laughing at me. Telling me how stupid I was and making me blush.

When I opened them her head was still bleeding, and then I was retching.

When I turned my head to see her hanging off my back, her head a bloody mess, I think I cried. Or vomited again. My whole body hurt so much. Why did it hurt? My eyes stung with tears as I ran to the stable. They had to have medical supplies. Something. Wildfire couldn't die. I... she couldn't. We were supposed to be heroes. Heroines couldn't die. The pipbuck on my forehoof sang a sad song, but I couldn't hear the words. Somepony was sobbing too loudly to hear anything.

I ran my way to the stable. A wooden door leading to a tunnel barred my way, so I kicked it into splinters. As I ran, half-blinded by tears, half-blinded by darkness, I could still hear the blood.

Drip. Drip. Dripping.

Thankfully, the huge gear-like door of the stable proper had long since been moved. There were guards, but I must have killed them, because they were dead by the time I eased Wildfire down to the ground.

She was breathing. Quick shallow breaths that sounded almost painful. Looking at her head I saw why. I vomited again. Half of her head had been blown apart. The whole right side of her head was a bloody mess. Chips of her skull were plastered in her blood soaked mane, and... and I could see part of her brain, oh god.

She was already dead.

I could hear her breaths, and she struggled to talk, but she was dead all the same. A bullet to the head

was not something a healing potion could fix. Hell, all the goddesses' magic couldn't bring her back. I fell to the ground beside her, my whole body aching.

“Heh.” Was she laughing? Tears streamed down my face. “I... never gotta... shoot...”

“... My gun.” I finished for her. Her eyes rolled into her head and I felt my stomach tie itself into knots. “No...” She looked at me with all her strength. It was hopeless. Why did it hurt so much? My head throbbed; my body heaved. She was shot, not me, so why did it hurt so damn much?

“Love... you, hon... sorry...” I shook my head. Why the hell was she apologizing. Blood flowed down her cheeks like macabre tears, but she kept talking. She was dead, and still she talked. “Wanted... impress you... hurts... it's dark... where are...”

“Stop... just... I'm sorry... please...” I cradled her body into my chest. “D-don't. Be quiet. I'll get... something... a unicorn... fix you right up. You have to..don't talk.”

“Sorry... I... been fun... I'm cold... why is... so dark? Kill... kill them... for me.”

Dead. Her warm blood flowed over my forelegs staining my coat a deep red. I wished I could die with her. Just stay there on the floor and never move again... but...

“What the hell?” A voice to my left. A raider. Wildfire had told me to kill them; it was her dying wish. Wrenching my pistol from its holster with my mouth, my tongue pulled the trigger unleashing a fury of lead. Ten shots, but the raider was dead by the third.

As gently as I could laid Wildfire's body down. A surge of emotion took me, and gasping, I fought back tears. Leaning down, I planted a kiss on her forehead. She tasted like iron. “I'll be back... I'll bury you...” I promised her. I knew if I didn't she'd haunt me, and part of me wouldn't have minded so much.

Three doors flanked the entrance area. Not caring about which, I charged down the centre one. Ponies needed to die, and I was just the one to make it happen. A strange fury took me. I needed to hit something. To break everything I saw. Things *needed* to die.

A poor buck turned the corner towards me. His eyes grew wide: surprised, worried, scared? I didn't care. Spinning in place, I bucked his head into a bloody pulp. There was a second. A skinny unicorn in barely-held-together barding. My tongue clicked the trigger of the gun still in my mouth. Nothing. When did I waste my clip? No matter I swung my head and sent the pistol flying into the unicorn's face. He backed up, shrieking obscenities, giving me just enough time to aim my rifle.

More turned the corner. I heard hoof steps behind me. Of course they knew. How many had I killed? That wouldn't go unnoticed. Hell, they probably had cameras. If they had then they knew about Wildfire... they'd know I had no intention of stopping. Good. Let them come.

One popped around the corner. My gun clicked. Crap. I jammed the barrel into the pony's eye. He screamed like a filly. He dropped after I pulled it out, grabbing at his eye socket and giving me all the time in the world to crush his skull. I grabbed the gun from his mouth and shut the door. I could hear the sound of distant hooves closing in on my location.

I took a quick look at my surroundings as I scraped the raider's brains off my hooves. A medical station by the looks. Spying a huge medical cabinet by the door I peeked inside. I grabbed a few health potions and bandages as the door slid open. I scurried quickly to the side of the cabinet and gave it a quick kick, sending the whole thing toppling on an unaware pony. My heart was pounding but I felt calm. Nothing had ever made this much sense. Kill the fuckers what killed Wildfire. Simple.

“For fuck's sake, catch the bitch,” somepony yelled on the other side of the door. Part of me wanted to stand fight and die. It'd be easier that way... but then what would be the point? A few less raiders, a voice in my head told me.

I turned tail and ran anyway. I dully realized that had once been white but was now stained yellow. Two centuries of dirt and grime builds up. I leaped over a surgery table, kicking it over. I didn't notice the skeleton on it until it clattered to the ground behind me. For a minute I wanted to figure out how it died. What happened that caused raiders to invade this stable. Pick locks, hack terminals, figure out the truth.

I realized how stupid that was. A 200 year grave needed to be let lie. Curiosity killed the molerat... or something.

I just managed to squeeze out of the medical offices' second door, which was stuck halfway open. Down the hall I heard hoofbeats but saw nothing. Stairs. Of course. Stables ran deep into the ground of course there would be stairs. Maybe I should have thought of these things before getting my best friend killed.

I ripped my battle-saddle off. It hung heavy in my jaw, but I hardly had time to reload my weapons, and didn't have the advantage of magic to make it go faster. So I ran to the stairs, saddle limp in my mouth. A pony with a pink spiked mane was running up the stairs at me.

I swung my head and let go. I didn't see the rifle and saddle connect, but I heard the sickening crunch and the dull thuds as he crashed back down the steps. Looking down, I saw him tangled up in my saddle, his rump sticking up in the air. What kind of cutie mark was a pistol anyway?

I dove off the stairs and skidded past him stopping only long enough to rip the spear from his unconscious mouth. Funny, given his cutie mark, I would have expected a gun. At the bottom of the stairs was a short hallway with a glowing sign hanging from the ceiling. "Atrium?" I said, though with the spear in my mouth it sounded more like "Ariuh."

I wasn't sure what an 'Atrium' was, but it seemed I was about to find out. Crashing though the door, I found myself in a large room. The floor I was on acted as a second floor balcony encircling the large open area below. Doors lined the sides of the balcony leading to several different rooms and hallways. Across the gap from the door I'd entered was a huge round window looking into an office.

On the other side of the window was an olive unicorn with a thick grey mane. I knew that pony. From where? I stared at him for a long time until I realized. It was him. He took the blue bullets; he killed my mother. I found him. Smooth Tongue. The leader of the Crimson Hooves. With all my strength I sent the spear flying across the gap. My laughter echoed in through the large room but died off.

Had the glass not been there the spear would have skewered the bastard like a stuck molerat instead of bouncing away harmlessly.

And now I was without a weapon, in an enemy fortification, having just announced my presence to everypony with functioning ears. Well fuck me sideways with a spear. The first pony to come scrambling through a door to my left would have happily obliged, had I not already been on him.

He was an earth pony with a thick brown coat and a pistol in his mouth. Frankly, mouth based firearms were wildly inaccurate at closer ranges so it was easy enough to smash his head in with my forehoof. This whole incursion made me glad I was so large, worth the teasing I got as a filly.

A searing pain ripped through my flank and I bucked my legs out wildly. I hit something -- the kick vibrated through my legs -- and I heard a scream and crash in the room below. I knew whoever it was was no longer a threat.. Another pain shot through me at my back knee. Gritting, my teeth I turned and struck out with my foreleg, my PipBuck smashing into the face of somepony.

They came swarming now. I could hear the stomping of hooves and a few pops but no gunshots. That struck me as odd, but I pushed through anyway, until something struck my neck, sending pain roaring up into my ears. Crying out, I reared.

I bit the closet pony in the neck. Kicked another. Bucked a third off my back. Another arc of pain soared through my chest. The world was spinning. Stables shouldn't spin. My whole body felt weary. My eyes dropped. Still, when I saw the eyes of a raider I headbutted him, sending him sprawling. More piled on me. I tried to shake them off. Tried.

There were too many. Dammit. I just needed to rest. I could kill them all. For Wildfire. If I could just rest.

“Oh, you're awake.” I heard a voice call out as soon as my eyes fluttered open. I should be dead. I'd been shot, and tackled, and stabbed too, I guess. Hay. I was on hay. Looking up, I saw Smooth Tongue staring down at me with large red eyes. “I know you must feel like you've had a string of bad luck that'd make a slave cringe, but trust me kiddo, the dice have been loaded since 'fore you stepped into my stable.” He smiled leaning on the desk on the other side of the room. “I am nice though, so I kept you alive despite it all.”

I tried to charge but fell. Chains jangled around my legs. “I am, however, not an idiot. You killed half a dozen good ponies, I am not about to let you walk about unabated.” I glowered at him, wishing I could set him on fire with my eyes. “Do you really hate me that much?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but my tongue felt thick and heavy. “Yeth.” I finally managed to slobber. He chuckled. “Don't try to do to much. You're tough, though, I'll give you that.” He waved a hoof at a small dart on the desk beside him. “Two of these took down a Hellhound... you were shot with six. Heh. Summer Silk, grab our guest a drink.” A few seconds later a mysterious pony in full armour laid a bottle of sparkle-cola before me.

I wanted nothing more then to buck it at his face... but I found myself so parched I drank it up anyway. It was luke-warm and carroty but also quenching. “Why?” I managed to say, my tongue feeling looser.

“You are stronger than any pony I have ever seen... not too bright, I'll admit. Charging head-first into blazing guns like the bloody Hero of the Wastes? But you are strong. I am not a pony to throw away talent, so I had a mind to recruit you.”

I spat.

“Pleasant. At least hear my offer.” His voice was smooth, charming and graceful. If he hadn't of killed my mother, maybe I would have listened.

“That's... not what I asked.” I didn't care why he kept me alive. “Why... why did you kill my mother?”

“Hmm.” He studied me carefully. “Yes. Yes, I see it now. I thought you might be her. It was such a shame what happened that day. Such. I really had no choice.” Other then murder. I wanted to laugh, but it hurt too much.. “My hold on the Crimson Hoof was tenuous. The former leader had come down with a severe case of broken neck earlier that week, and I was in charge. You have no idea what those bullets were do you? Starmetal?”

I shook my head. They were blue, and purple. I remembered that much, but ‘starmetal’ meant nothing to me.

“More valuable then you can imagine, and more dangerous. I was new, and your mother denied me. In front of my herd no less. A herd that was still getting used to my power. Had I backed down they would have turned on me like dogs, tearing for bits of flesh. I regret what had to be done, but had I cowed, the Crimson Hoof and all the towns under its control would burn.” Towns? I had thought only Marefort was ruled by them. “One life, or hundreds, it was not a tough choice... but it was a hard one. I regret what I did, but it was needed. 'No pony who seeks to rule can hope to keep their hooves clean of

blood.' Luna said that once, and she knows more than anypony.”

“You lie.”

“Often, and with great pleasure.” He smiled brightly and started to walk around his desk. “I rule thirteen towns, the largest of which is Marefort. I have secured trade lines with New Appleloosa, Fillydelphia, the Finders of Hoofington, and am currently working on a deal with Tenpony Tower once I can convince them I am no raider. Since I have taken control of the Crimson Hoof, everywhere my ponies go there has been peace.” My mind recalled the brutal slaughter of a caravan not days ago.

“You're raiders,” I said sharply, my hoof smashing the remains of the sparkle-cola bottle for emphasis. “You kill, pillage and rape.”

“Not I.” His eyes sparkled in the dull light, “I tend to wolves as well as sheep, and my flock is far from innocent. I try to root out the weeds, but I cannot remove them all. Too many. As much as I despise what they do, I need them. I have too much land and too few ponies.” I glared at him still. “Disbelieve? I care not.” He trotted up to the window and looked down at the Atrium. “Even if I was as you say, raping and pillaging is bad for me as well. I can control villages through fear, but it only takes one murder to send somepony like you off the deep end.”

“You have guards,” I pointed out. “They stopped me; they could stop anypony else.”

“I have some. Even still,” he knocked on the glass, “had this been broken, or not there, or had I been in the Atrium eating, I would be dead. No. Fear is good, but I need respect too. Most ponies see that, despite what they think of me, I am necessary. So I continue to be necessary, so that all can thrive,” he smiled at me, “I apologize, you must think me some old serials villain, gloating at his great works before I have you killed. That is not the plan.”

I struggled to my feet, the tranquilizers already wearing off. “What are you going to do with me then?”

“As I said before: If a pony resists you, you must feed them lead and fire. However, if they bend the knee, you must help them back up, else nopony will ever bend. I am giving you a choice, and I am telling you WHY you must need take it.” His eyes glimmered with... something. Hope, maybe. Whether it was hope for the future or hope I was fool enough to trust him I could not rightly say.

“You are scum.”

“All ponies have their place. I am sure you'd like to smash me. Beat me until my face was as unrecognizable as your friend's.” I charged at him again, and again the chains sent me falling to my knees. “Worry not, she will get a funeral.”

“Thank you,” I said bitterly, but with a touch of relief. If I could not complete her final request, I was glad she would have rest at least. “For Wildfire's sake and nothing else.”

“As I was saying, you could kill me. But then Marefort would burn.” I tugged at the chains again to no result. I could hear them straining to contain me. Creaking and groaning against my inequine strength. “I have appointed no single second in command. I have five, in fact. They hate each other. Should I die by an assassin's... spear, they would fight. Marefort would be attacked, ravaged and sacked. It has enough ammo for a war, after all. Tell me, do you still wish me dead, knowing this?”

“Yes,” I said instantly.

He sighed heavily, turning to me. “Really? You hate me that much?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You kill ponies.”

“So do you.” I shied away. Something about that hurt more than it had any right to. “Tell me, where do you think I get the stallions to defend my land... do you know where my army comes from?” I shook my head, and he facehoofed. “Idiot. How many bucks live in Marefort?” I stopped. There was Grey Wind... but he was just a colt. Old Redwyne was so old he couldn't walk anymore. Bright Flame was maimed and only had one leg, and a few other colts whose names I could not remember. Was that truly all there was? I opened my mouth and shut it.

“Do you get it?”

It came. Slowly. So few stallions at Marefort (funny, I never realized what the name meant before). So many Crimson Hooves. My brother taken. I dropped my head low. It throbbed as the horrid realization came to me. “You spent last night killing the brothers, fathers and sons of the ponies you grew up with. Of your friends. Even if I let you go, they wouldn't accept you back.”

My body seethed. All my muscles tensed, and the only thing I could think of was splattering his brains. I moved, slowly at first. The chains binding my legs to the floor creaked as I pressed. The stress burned my legs, but I inched forward despite it all ignoring the sharp pain. Then, with a resounding crack, the chains shattered. Smooth Tongue turned, his eyes wide.

I charged.

Only for that damnable, quiet guard Summer Silk to tackle me. Was he a fool? I snapped chains like small ponies snapped twigs, I was *not* to be messed with. Wrestling him off, I rammed him up against the office wall, my head bashing against his helmet. Bad idea. I recoiled and backed up as my forehead throbbed.

He moved forward at me again, more the pity. With an almost lazy blow I cracked my PipBuck against his head sending him sprawling to the floor. I spat blood, moving forward as his helmet rolled off. I reared up ready for the kill. And stopped.

A pony with a silver-grey coat and purple mane stared up at me. Somehow I knew beneath his armoured-barding there would be a rose cutie mark. “Meadow...” I gasped. It couldn't be. My brother. Why... why did he strike me? I was going to save him... I.

“Silver Storm,” he replied coolly.

“What the fuck!” I screeched. Behind, I could hear Smooth Tongue chuckling. “... I came to save you! Wildfire! She...” The words caught in my throat, and I would have cried all over again but my anger burned away the tears.

He brought himself to his feet and glared. “I don't need rescuing,” he said his voice like a whip, “you fucking idiot.” Those words hurt more than any wound I had suffered. “I am here by choice. You heard Smooth... this is the best way. We have peace, and you're trying to fuck it up!”

“You're a raider.” I refused to believe. My brother. I... he was always so kind to me. When the other ponies hated me and made fun, he comforted me. This pony... he couldn't be the same one. No.

“A Crimson Hoof,” the silver-grey pony countered.

“The same thing.”

“No. We protect ponies. Dammit Silver, why can't you just se-”

“I saw.” My voice was a hoarse whisper. “I saw you kill traders. Murder them. I saw the blood on your smiling face. I wanted to think that they forced you... that... that it wasn't you who I saw. Just who they made you become. A shadow. That you only did it to survive. I was wrong... about so many things.”

Every muscle in my body felt so tense, like they were about to snap. "I..."

I looked at him. He was still my brother, I realized at last. Same as before. Only he was wrong. He was excusing himself; he had become a monster. Or... either that or I was the monster trying to break peace. But... how could I accept peace at this cost! Why can't anything be clear?! All I wanted was to save my brother! To be a hero! What the fuck happened to good and evil? When did everything become so confused? Why... why...

I stomped my hoof leaving a bloody indent in the floor.

Smooth Tongue touched me. Trying to comfort me? I bucked him. Behind, I heard the glass window strain and shatter. A half-second later, a deep thud.

My brother. No. He wasn't, not anymore. He stood in front of me, shocked.

He reached for his pistol so I charged through him. I bucked the office door open and escaped. To where, I didn't know.

A blinding pain shot up my left foreleg. Looking down I saw a hole and blood. Shot. I was shot. By who?

It didn't matter. I ran. Anypony was welcome to come and try to stop me.

I don't know how I managed to get out. But I did. Hours later, or perhaps days, I stopped and laid down atop a cliff. I had just managed to get the bullet out of my leg. It hurt more coming out. I may have screamed.

Dropping the fragment beside me, I looked at it closely: twisted metal shards dyed deep red with my blood. Beneath that was something else. A deep purple colour that seemed to burn through the blood. Or was it blue? I turned my head, and the colours shifted and twisted until I realized what it was.

Starmetal bullet. *More dangerous than I knew*, Smooth Tongue had told me. Yet when I drank a healing potion and wrapped my leg up tightly with the bandages I scavenged from Stable 42, it didn't feel any different than a normal gunshot. Exhausted, I closed my eyes and rested.

When I awoke my leg was stiff, but that was good considering I'd been shot. Getting up slowly, I started walking. I didn't know where I was going. Smooth was right about one thing: Marefort would never have me back. So I walked south, away from the Stable. The only way I knew I wouldn't be seen.

The first few days I managed with the supplies I had. Thankfully, the Hooves never took my saddlebags when they captured me, and I'd prepared enough supplies for two. I didn't feel thankful though. Each step was a test. Each time I moved forward, I fought the urge to lay down and never move again. I deserved it. I'd sacrificed the life of my best friend and-- all for a dream and a voice on the radio.

Even the upbeat tunes of my PipBuck couldn't keep me happy. I may have cried. I just kept walking. After a few days my leg got stiffer and stiffer. When I unwrapped the bandages I smelled decay. My leg. The coat had fallen off and the skin was deathly purple. Starmetal.

I kept walking. My leg got worse. It smelled like death, and soon I could not move it all. I ran out of supplies, too. I kept walking. The sun filtered by the ever-present cloud layer beat down on me. But I had to walk. I dragged my leg. I hoped to find somepony, anypony to take me in.

I collapsed.

I spat out dirt, but I didn't have the strength to get up. I had eaten my food, drank my water. I was going to die. With all my massive strength I tried to move, but my body roared in protest, and I fell back

down. I closed my eyes. My whole body hurt. My stomach rumbled and growled and stung. My throat was parched to the point I tried to drink the dirt. I was nothing. I managed to look back at my body. Once strong, now feeble. Between the barding and saddle packs I saw my cutie mark.

Three rocks. Maybe that was my destiny. To become part of the wasteland, to feed the rocks with my body. My soul had already died with Wildfire, and it was all I had left. The wasteland took everything I had to give and wanted more, like a greedy foal. It would take my cutie mark too if it could. I didn't deserve it. I didn't deserve life. I failed at everything I'd ever done, because I was too stupid to see. If only.

War never changes. I never understood it, not until that moment. Methods change. Ponies change. Organizations change. But in the end war takes everything from you and leaves only a shell. That part... that part never changed.

I hadn't lasted a week when all was said and done. The last thing I heard was my PipBuck relaying the static-y news. *"Arbu is dead. Reports have reached me that every pony in the town, over two dozen, have been killed. And listen children, I don't know how to say this... but..."*

"But it looks like it was the Stable Dweller who was responsible."

There was no such thing as heroes.

Footnote:

Silver Storm

Special:

Strength: 10

Perception: 4

Endurance: 8

Charisma: 5

Intelligence: 3

Agility: 5

Luck: 5

(A/N: First I would like to give props to Kkat for creating a world so enthralling it basically begged to be written in. credit goes to theBSDude for editing and making the thing awesome. ~No One~)

Chapter 1: Deja Vu

"It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance"

Dead. I should have been dead. Then why did everything hurt so fucking much? My eyes filtered opened. Light. Blinding. Something standing above me. A pony... or... I could barely see. I thought I saw wings. Maybe. And a cutie mark. I could see... two clouds. That's what it looked like. A closed sky cutie mark. Like the wasteland. Fuck, everything hurt. Wildfire... she'd save me. Dead. She was still dead.

My eye closed. When I opened them again, the pegasus had a syringe in its mouth.

"Hmm. Are you awake?"

My eyes opened and painful light filtered in. I was alive. Somehow. Starved, dehydrated and suffering from some vile poison, yet I was alive. I should have died with Wildfire, so I closed my eyes, trying. I breathed deep, and my chest stung. If only I had a gun, I would shoot myself and finish the job the wasteland started.

"Oh, stop that. Open your eyes." A dark brown stallion with a purple and green mane was looking over me. I guessed he was a doctor. Not because he was looking over me, but because he was wearing a white lab-coat doctor-y goggles with a stethoscope.

"Who..." damn, when did my throat become a desert? Seemingly reading my mind, the doctor floated a bottle of water, and I quickly sucked it back, wishing for more and expecting nothing. It tasted like a dinner fit for kings.

"Dr Morowynd," he said with a sweeping bow, "head physician and cybernetic expert of Watcher Caravan 54."

"A what?"

"A Watcher Caravan," he said slower.

"What?"

Sighing, he face hoofed, "Starvation must have killed brain cells." I glared at him. Starvation had nothing to do with it; I was a certified idiot. If he didn't believe me, he could very well ask Wildfire. "The Watchers are an...organization formed in the NCA, Eye Glow to be precise, whose goal it is to help every pony survive. Not for free, but we charge as little as possible to keep us going. Currently, my base is in-

"You saved me?" I looked around the room wildly. It was a small dingy room that smelled of stale piss and mold. The white walls were chipping, and the medical equipment seemed rusty, but better than anything I'd ever seen in Marefort. My heart sank as I thought of my hometown. Had I been alone I would have cried, but weakness was not something I could afford to show. Steeling myself up, I gave him my most defiant look, praying I didn't betray it.

"No." He stopped. "Kind of. Somepony carried you to Bridle Hope, can't say who, never did see him." No, not save me. I was dead, as dead as Wildfire. She died trying to be a hero, but heroes die. I was given a second chance, and idiot as I was, I never made the same mistake twice. If surviving was all I could do, I swore to myself on that hospital bed that I would survive. *Survive*. No job too low, no boundary I wouldn't cross. I...I needed to be stronger. Tougher. I promised Wildfire I'd kill the

Crimson Hoof. All of them. And to do that I had to throw away any pretensions of heroics. Heroics would kill me sure as rain. I needed to survive. "What... is your name by the way." he seemed worried.

"Hired Gun." Who names their child Hired Gun? Idiot. Quickly I added: "Where is this place?"

"Bridle Hope Implant Center and Hospital."

That made sense. Herbal medicine and all that, "So you sell plants."

"Uh no. Implants." he shuffled his hooves awkwardly, "I may have already added a neural enhancement into your frontal lobe, though it may not have been enough... You looked liked you needed it. Among other things." Other... I tried to roll onto my front to get to a sitting position. Something was wrong. I couldn't *feel* one of my legs, but when I moved to roll something helped me, and something helped me onto my haunches. Hearing a slight whirling and creaking I saw... it.

"MY LEG!" Didn't exist. The one shot with Starmetal. The one that was twisted and blue. In it's place was a skeleton of metal and wires. Fuck me with the barrel of my gun, I was a fucking robot.

"Now calm do-" I pushed off the bed and tackling him to the ground, ready to shove my calm down his throat. "Pu-puhplease. Li-s."

"What the hell did you turn me into!"

"You were dying!" He screeched, his voice shrill, as I raised my new metallic hoof over his head. A more ironic death I couldn't figure. For some reason the joint between my torso and metal leg burned. "The Poison. I-it took your leg. It was dead. Had I waited any longer... your whole body. Infected. I had to a-act." More dangerous then I could imagine. "A single scratch from those things and the infection will take you. If the scratch is about the head neck or torso death is within hours. In the legs... it can be staved off for weeks depending on the pony, but the blood will be forever tainted. You will die, but it will take longer for Starmetal to claim you. Amputating the leg was all I could do to slow the infection... it gives you a chance. The prosthetic is free of charge, no worries about that. Please, don't do this." I backed off him, stepping around the bed where I had been laying. The burning in my joint calmed down as he levitated a shotgun back onto the counter. He had been pointing it at my head... and I didn't notice. Shit.

"Okay." I said sitting back on my haunches. Calm. Cool. Collected. Silver may have been hyper aggressive when threatened, but Hired Gun had to be calculating, and silent. "Where in Equestria am I?" I bent my left foreleg a bit, hearing it squeak. I suppose, being free, I couldn't expect it to be top-of-the-line.

"Not Equestria. Bridle Hope in the-"

"What?" Not Equestria? But that was a pony I was talking to.

"You're not in Equestria. Or not in what WAS Equestria before the war. That's north past the cliffs. Before the war this territory was an independent state known as Caledonia. They still were ruled, technically, by Celestia, but it had it's own governing party."

"You were never bombed?"

"We were." he assured me. That was good. Radiation was such a part of my world, I'd be sad to see it go. "Not as severely. The states never officially declared war against the Zebra...but there were more than Zebras and ponies in the war... Zebras fed spells to their allies, and we were bombed. Much o--" I just realized how little I cared about history.

"Okay. Bridle Hope. Whatever. I need work."

“You still have a debt to pay.” He looked taken aback by my interruptions but must have learned not to aggravate me. Smart pony. “I...the leg was free, but other services we provided were not. Worry not. You look capable with a gun, right? I will give you some caps for a new one, and I'll need you to help me guard a supply waggon east. We are supplying purified water to the outlying villages you see, and raiders...well you know. After that, all you need do is follow me to Dise to meet my boss, and you're free to find work.”

“Dice?” Like the things gambling-type ponies rolled. I wasn't sure I was understanding.

“Dise.” Licking his lips he continued, “You've never heard of Dise?” As I shook my head I swear I hear him mutter something about another implant.

The city of lights. Sin's city. Once called Celestia's Paradise, but the sign bearing the name had faded to just Dise so that's what the residents called it. Before the war it was some sort of 'getaway' where the worst of all sins were treated as common-place. According to the Doctor, and his rather sketchy sources, The Ministry Of Morale billed it as an “adult party” where veterans of the war could go to wash their fears away. Only the main strip was actually owned by Equestria; the rest of the city was independent. Apparently it survived the war. Or at least it wasn't bombed quite so much as everywhere else in the world.

There was gambling there, he said, and I agreed to go. Hell, this 'Last City In The World' might be half interesting, and the idea of gambling my caps away warmed my stomach. First, we had to deliver water, which seemed weird. According to him it'd take a week there from Dise, and a week back. Wouldn't they need water...sometime between that?

Par for the course it was just me being an idiot. The water, he explained, was for medical procedures and the like. Nothing more dangerous than pouring radiation straight into a wound. They also delivered Rad-away and Rad-X when the locals did have to drink the local supply, but the fresh water went a long way to help the small communities. Hell, if Marefort had semi-regular pure water shipments it would have reduced trade costs by a sizable percentage, due to the less Rad-Away we'd have to purchase. More over, The Watchers gave it away for bloody free. Free! Maybe they hadn't gotten the memo that the world had ended and it was fight-for-yourself time.

Still, I know I had wantonly decided to be a cold-blooded mercenary and all that, but I couldn't help but be thankful the first job Celestia sent me was from such a group. Stable 42 was just a taste of what was to come in my journeys, and I knew that, but at least working for The Watchers wouldn't make me hate myself. I already hated myself enough. And I really should have paid attention to where I was going.

I tripped.

Fell face first into a mailbox with a ringing sound and sharp pain through my head. My neck snapped back as I flipped onto my side groaning. Looking down at my leg I saw my stupid mechanical leg stuck in a hole. Of course if I'd had a real fucking leg, I would have felt it, but metal has no nervous system. Sighing, I stayed on the ground staring up the cloudy sky. Grey and dead, just like this town. Well, this town was actually brown and teeming with life, but just let me have my metaphors, okay?

“I need...” I said aloud, “DJ-PON3.” Lowering my head, I pressed my pipbuck with my nose. Nothing. I pressed again. Nothing at all. That's it. I'm going to burn all technology.

“Bridle Hope General Store?” Since when did my pipbuck have a map? Apparently passing out in the Dise wasteland improves your technology. Maybe if I got myself in two more coma's my pipbuck might just come with magical limb regeneration powers. That damned implant did something with my mind; I never had this... imagination thing before. I was like some sort of idiotic daydreaming cyborg.

Named Hired Gun. I really should have thought the name through.

“Hey there, Sweet Pea.” Of course, there are worse names. Above me was a slightly older mare with a thick black mane with white streaks and dirty green coat. “What'cha doin' on that there ground? Ain't never seen ya 'round these parts 'fore. Ah'm Nanny Jane, proprietor of this store. And you are...”

“Hired-”

“Gun yes, one don't forget a name like that easily,” her grin mocked me. “You're the one what passed out south of town, right? Or what was dragged here some say. No matter, Ah suppose. Way I hear it, you're in debt to the Watchers. Good folks them, don't be listenin' to any rumours; they're good folks.” Repetitive *and* annoying. Great. If she knew me at all she'd know I didn't listen to any rumours. Nothing but bad blood there. “Now, you be wantin' some guns right? Well you come ta the right place Ah says. Just stay outta tha backroom.”

Trotting behind me, she pushed me until I got up, and walked into her store. Celestia approves aggressive marketing. “You'll be wantin' a battle saddle.” I nearly said I had one, until I remember I'd used it to crush somepony's face. Good times. “Now this model ain't new, but reliable. Comes with 'n auto reload function and dual .357 repeaters.” The guns were not impressive. They looked old, rusted, and ready to fall apart. Whatever, they shot bullets, and that was enough. “500 caps.” The Doc would later yell at me for getting scammed.

I also bought some Apple Snacks, and a bottle of Sunrise Sarsaparilla. It was a nice town I guess. A few cobbled together houses made from the remnants of a Pre-War town. Less ponies than Marefort, but a larger area. It felt open. Like I could walk for hours and still be in town. No tripping over sleeping ponies, or dodging fillies as they ran underfoot. Idiot. Stop thinking of Marefort, that pony is dead.

When did I become such a drama queen? I needed to kick something.

Sometimes the goddess' were just. As I walked down a small hill I heard shouting. “Get off my damn farm!” Pop quiz: What happens when lizards absorb too much magical radiation?

They grow and gain sharp needle-like teeth of course. Another reminder of the apocalypse. I charged headfirst down the hill and splattered a gecko's head with a resounding bang. To my left, a second climbed a white picket fence and jumped maw-first at me. Apparently my metal leg was inedible, given its whine as it chewed on it. With a single shake the beast lost it's grip and went airborne. It was the easiest thing in the world to aim and...

My joint burned and the beast's head exploded without me firing a shot. I turned my head to see a (beautiful) white unicorn mare standing there with a smoking gun floating beside her. Her deep red mane cascaded down her head and back like a waterfall, reminding me of Wildfire's...damn, now I'm sad. And throbbing. Looking down, I saw that one of those fuckers had its teeth sunk into my leg above my pipbuck.

“Get off!” I shook my other leg this time, but the only thing that accomplished was to make it sting more. It was then I realized how much better it'd be to be a unicorn, as I couldn't aim my battle saddle at my own leg. The Gecko exploded into bloody chunks thanks to the (beautiful) unicorn mare. Turning my attention I gave a bloody grin. Three left. I bit my battle saddle reigns hearing the lovely click of a reloading gun.

“You're an idiot.” I winced a little as the (beautiful. Okay, I think I made the point clear. Feel free to add the word beautiful from now on) unicorn mare painfully cleaned my wound. “Why would you charge down the hill like that?” She had her head down so I could just barely see her radiant (it's not

beautiful, shut up) purple eyes peering through her hair. Her name was Pearly, and I had said it was a lovely name because I am stupid. Apparently, idiot heroes were in season as she smiled when I said that. "You have a new leg, ya know, and have you even tested them guns yet? They could've been faulty." Truth be told, she seemed more disturbed when I mentioned I bought my gun from Nanny Jane than at my skeletal metal leg. I didn't question it further though; rumours never helped anypony.

She had half led, half dragged me to her little shack on the other side of her meagre farm. Turns out radiated water is not the best for growing crops, but she tried. She mentioned something about a NCA farm near Dise that managed to find a way around the problem, but that really meant nothing to me. Her shack was a little on the small side, with little else besides a stained mattress and table to it's name.

"Sorry." I said as coolly as I could. She just smirked at me making me feel half a fool. Which, since I always felt half a fool, made me feel like a full fool. Or something. I never was good at math.

She sighed deeply looking at me. "Listen, thanks. I don't have any caps to pay you for your help, but I can take a look at those guns of yours. Make'em run right... that *Nanny Jane*," She made the word a curse. Why was gossip so tempting? "Don't know the butt, from the barrel." She pressed her hoof to my forehead, checking my temperature I guessed. The flushing in my cheeks must have skewered her data though..."You feeling sick? Light headed? Dizzy?"

I shook my head.

"Weak? Like you're going to throw up?" I shook my head again and she just frowned. "Those gecko bites are poisonous... you should be sick." Nope, wasn't. "Whatever, you're feeling fine, and that's what matters. Hate to see you sick..." Her smile made me smile. Damn things are infectious. Come on Silver, you're supposed to be a cold hard killer. Or... something. "You don't talk much, do you, hon?" Why, oh why, did she have to use that word.

"No."

"Why not, hon? Ya got a lovely voice."

"Nothing to say."

"Hm. Quiet one, eh? Ya know... you don't leave till the morrow, and you look like you'd make a good poker player. That quiet hard-ass, yeah, you'll bluff like a pro." I had no idea what that meant. "Let's hit the casino." A casino, as I found out later, was a large building full of colourful flashing lights. Also they sold whiskey.

Whiskey is amazing.

I woke up with a headache. Visions of the night before flickered dimly in my head. The first hour was clear. I turned out to be terrible at poker as I couldn't understand the rules, but I liked blackjack. Even an idiot can count to twenty one. Then the drinks came, and things got... less clear. There was drinking and dancing. Somepony dancing... I doubt it was me; I never danced. There were... other memories too. Nothing clear though, but I remember being warm. Very warm. I shook my head, and that made it throb more. Why did whiskey forsake me so?

Groaning, I opened my eyes rolling onto my side as my metal leg clanged loudly against something sending a spark of pain flashing through my head. It was then I realized I didn't know where I was. I had been staying at the local clinic, but this wasn't it. It was small, dirty and... what was my Battle saddle doing crumpled in the corner? Wait... this was Pearly's house. Now why was I in there?

Speak of Nightmare Moon, and she appears. Pearly trotted into her house at that moment, a basket of shrivelled apples in her mouth. With a smile and a blush she dropped it before of me, flipping her red

hair a bit before regarding me shyly. “Ah know it ain’t much, but, you know what with radiation and all, it’s amazing anything grows at all.”

“You have must have a green hoof.” That was stupid; obviously her hoof was white, not green. Apparently speaking in cliches was all I was capable of. I blame the whiskey. Or that neural implant Doc installed. Both were amazing and shitty. Like my life, except without the amazing part.

I’ve also been rambling a lot more. Maybe the my brain is trying to get used to the new enhancements by subliminally making me think of stupid shit to work it out. Lowering my head I bit into the apples. Kinda dry, but very tasty. At least compared to the two hundred year old food I was used to eating. “They’re good.” I wasn’t sure if the look on her face was one of pride or of relief.

“So...about last night...” Something in my stomach tightened. Clearly, she was nervous, and about something I didn’t remember. Crap. Damn you, whiskey; give me my memories back. Was she blushing? Yup blushing, and staring at the floor.

Quickly I got to my feet and nuzzled her neck. “It was good...”

Her head jolted back. Startled maybe? “Yeah, heh. good.” I wonder if there was some sort of emotion-detecting-implant. I was a cyborg already; one more couldn’t hurt. Maybe then I’d understand these crazy ponies. She backed off turning quickly, “The doctor was looking for you. You should go. He’s impatient, and you should never keep a Watcher waiting...”

“What?”

“Nothing. A stupid rumour.” She turned, smiling brightly with her eyes. “Want some dirt on who you’ll be sharing Guard duty with?” Normally rumours were not my cup of tea, but between the headache (for once I was thankful for the overcast sky. Any brightness and my brain would have exploded. Twice) and the confusion regarding my activities the night before... well I couldn’t say no.

“Now the unicorn is named Lye. She speaks softly but a lot even though most’um can’t hear a word she’s talkin’ bout. The Pegasus is... Sail I believe. Don’t know much bout him ’cept he’s a mercenary from Dise or something. Seems a nice buck, but he gives the dirtiest looks.” I groaned a bit resting my head onto her table, “You feelin’ alright, hon?”

I nodded groggily. My head was pounding and now I was learning things. My brain officially hated me. She poked me with her horn, “You sure?”

After getting dressed she (kissed) waved goodbye, giving me a present (of the explosive variety) as I left. As I strolled through town, various ponies I didn’t recognize smiled at me and called out. I replied curtly as I couldn’t remembering anything. One of these days I would ask Pearly what exactly happened, but then again somehow I knew that question would be awkward. Oh well, I’d just not think about. What was the likelihood I’d ever come back to this backwater town, anyway?

As I trotted my way up the hill leading to the clinic, I took a break from staring at my feet (to make sure my stupid metal leg didn’t trip on anything) to notice that beside the clinic was a rather large building with flashing lights all over it. It took me half a second to realize it was the casino. When the hell did it get there? And better yet: why, if my temporary residence was mere meters away from the casino, did I stumble all the way to Pearly’s home? Also who builds a den of inequity and hubris next to a medical building? It was just asking for trouble.

“Hired,” Dr Morowynd cantered up to me, “Glad to see you up and about... and so active. Normally rehabilitation takes much longer.” Rehabila-wha?

“Rehabila-wha?”

“You know, learning how to use your leg, now that its... gone.” The brown doctor perked up, and he tilted his head.

“Oh. Sorry. Didn't know I was supposed to be rehabilitated.”

“So,” He measured me closely, holding his head high so as to look at me eye-to-eye, “you didn't need rehabilitation... because you didn't know you needed rehabilitation? You truly are special.” He whinnied before trotting back to his caravan, intentionally or unintentionally whipping his green tale at me.

Four covered carriages. Eight brahmin to pull the carriages. Twelve ponies including myself. One pegasus. And more bottles of purified water than I cared to count. So at least a dozen.

“This is the pony I was talking about,” the Doc was saying to his ragtag bunch, “Hired Gun.” He really didn't have to snicker every time he said my 'name'.

Cracking my neck to the side, I regarded my company. Other than the Doctor, I recognized a bright blue pegasus in a twin battle saddle and a Black white-maned unicorn with a soft smile. The rest I hadn't bothered to learn the names of. Hopefully they wouldn't try to talk to me.

“Introductions later,” The Doc said hastily, “We're days behind schedule.” And thus we left.

I took one last look at Bridle Hope, realizing I had never really looked at it. A single road ran from the clinic and casino, weaving in between rows of once-identical houses that had fallen into ruin or been repaired with spare parts. The road split near the centre into a broken highway, leading north and south. To the south-west, near the bottom of a small hill, was Pearly's shack and farm. For a second, I thought I saw her staring up at me. The only other building of note was an abandoned school with a tall bell tower; notably lacking a bell.

Sighing, I followed behind the last cart, walking slowly to as not trip. On the other side of the hill that held the clinic was a small dirt road that twisted down and east for a ways before turning north into the hill lands. Raider territory.

“What brings you here?”

A pony named Smooth Tongue, you? Sighing, I backed away. NCA guard station, the blue pegasus, Sail, told me, I really could have guessed that. They were decked to the nines in large battle saddles with dual rifles, armoured barding with the letters 'N.C.A' embroidered on the side like a target, and full helmets that made them basically the faceless representation of their entire government.

“Governments” Sail corrected flipping in the air to land to my left, “New Caledonian Alliance.”

“Cale-what?” This seemed like one of the things I should have known. Maybe if the Crimson Hoof allowed free trade we may have gotten some traders from the south, and you know, information of the world besides the small section we were permitted to trade with. I used the word trade three times in that last sentence, if my idioticness needed any clarification.

“Caledonian. It's like the country what was here 'fore everypony blew up.” He jumped into the air flapping beside me. Maybe if I hit him he'd stay still. “The NCA is actually a coalition of five cities who formed an alliance so as to deal with outsiders more unfinedly.” Even I knew that wasn't a word. “Truth is the five of'em fight amongst themselves more then they make deals without outsiders. Their for-ray into the Dise wasteland is their first real attempt at diplomacy,” Well, they're doing a fantastic job. Random under-staffed highway checks near raider territory certain wouldn't end in wholesale slaughter. Also, this Sail seemed to be able to read my mind. “It's for appearance. They want the locals to think they care.”

“Why?”

“Hell if I know. Do I look like that government-y type to you?”

“You're Enclave.” I knew that 'cause he kept mentioning it.

“True Enclave! Don't let them assholes closing up the sky tell you any different,” Mentally I reminded myself to try and care, “We left on purpose, we did. And we'll show them one day. We'll show'em why we're the True Enclave.” Sounded like a blast.

“You are working for the Watchers?”

“Yeah, what's wrong with that?” He crossed his forelegs flying backwards facing me.

“Why?”

“Huh? Cause they hired me? What're ya dumb?” Yup. Still his explanation didn't seem to touch on the real point, and that was why the Enclave, these superior government Pegasus types, would hire themselves out for caps. Pearly called them 'Enclave Remnants' which obviously meant some sort of separate breakaway group not at all associated with those what closed off the sky (Pearly had explained who the Enclave were earlier, and I'd pretended to care). “Hmph. Don't matter. These NCA types ain't gunna stay. They expect Dise to bow to their superior tech and fancy uniforms. Ain't gunna happen. Dise answers to no pony.”

“Whatever.” I watched as the Doctor spoke with the two NCA officers. The ramshackle hotel that served as their headquarters loomed behind them. The stallions, actually one stallion and one mare, spoke to the doctor from behind a newly-erected fence. Any pony could easily have walked around their guardpost, but our carriages wouldn't have made it up the steep hills that flanked us. The only other option was taking the time to go around one of the hills and hoping there wasn't another guard station there.

“How much loooooonger?” a voice said below me. A green colt pouted up at me shaking his grey mane.

“Soon, Mischief.” That really was a bad name to give a colt. He was... somepony's son. Or an orphan who worked for The Watchers. I forgot. The cutie-markless colt prided himself as the group's mascot. Maybe we needed a flag with him on it.

“They should hurry uuuuuup. I'm bored. We're The Watchers, you know,” I know, “And nobody messes with The Watchers. We give water to all the ponies, so they should just let us *through!*” I tried to respond, but Mischief sped away kicking dirt in my face.

I coughed. “Kids.”

“He's right though. If the NCA wanna gain the trust'o the ponies, they'd best learn not to impede The Watchers.” I could have nodded. But the fact that the two NCAers opened their gates and let us pass without any further difficulty proved that point.

As we marched past their little operation, I took the chance to steal a look at their weapons. Semi-automatic rifles with recoil suppressors attached to their saddles, and what looked like a special ammo changing mechanism activated by the pull of a lever. Nice. One the of NCAers (I needed a better name for NCA grunts) disagreed and glared beneath their helm, growling. Matching the glare, I kept my eyes on him till we passed by.

“Is it always like this?”

“Yes...” a soft voice said beside. Lye, The unicorn mare Pearly had told me about had somehow appeared beside me, and I hadn't noticed. She looked absolutely ridiculous with that huge gun attached to her tiny frame. “In the east, NCA guardposts are as prevalent as the raiders are resilient. You'll find

Steel Ranger outposts too but less often, and they move frequently to avoid the NCA. Closer to Dise you'll be stopped constantly by one of the major gangs sending out patrols to keep undesirables from getting close to the city. Most will leave you alone, or at most filch some caps from you. In the west... don't go west." I had to literally stretch my ears up even to hear her.

"Steel Rangers?"

She sighed. "You'll know them when you see them." I've always said ponies need to be more vague.

I did know them when I saw them.

As daylight waned in the sky (I assumed by the dimming light, but when the sun is perpetually hidden, it's hard to say) they came rumbling out from behind brown rocks that looked eerily similar to my cutie-mark. Four of them trotted slowly to us completely unafraid of our superior numbers. I didn't blame them. Each was dressed from nose to tail in thick metal armour that I don't think all our guns combined could pierce. Their flash-light eyes glowed eerily as their huge laser weapons unfolded on their backs and pointed at us. I was positive a single one could have wiped the floor with us with one fore-hoof, and fight off all of the Crimson Hoof with the other. But, even in all their armour, I was still larger than any one of them.

"We can take 'em. We can-" Quickly I lifted Mischief up by the mane and threw him on my back.

"What! Put me down! I wo-" I turned my head around and shot him a glare that could shatter glass.

"Who leads here?"

Doctor Morowynd stepped forward his head held high.

"Chief," I said to the rambunctious colt, "stay back. " or else. He got the picture, hopped off my back and galloped away as I took my place beside the Doc.

The Steel Ranger who'd spoken took off his helm and shook his-- oops, her white mane out before walking up. The yellow pony seemed smaller and younger without the ferocious mask, but completely in control. This was routine for her. "I am Blackwater. Name. How many in your party. Destination."

"Doctor Morowynd, thirteen and a colt, to the villages of Maring, Stafford, and Wendin to deliver water."

"Humph." She looked the doctor over a few times, her eyes as cold as ice. "Water?"

"Aye. On behalf of The Watchers." There was a faint smile on her muzzle.

"No doubt. Do you know how often I hear that? Somepony is providing weapons to the Raiders around the hills... the other day a patrol was hit by a rocket launcher. Can never be too careful." Her head half tilted to the silent Ranger behind her. "Search their things. How many guards?"

"Three."

"Kill anypony with a weapon who is not a guard." She finished almost impassively. Was this really them trying to impress the locals and gain support? At least the NCA threats of bloody murder were subtle instead of overt. "You." It just made no sense, "You!" Huh? I blinked realizing Blackwater was staring at me. "Are you slow?"

My response was a dead stare so she continued. "Who are you?"

"Hired Gun." I matched her cold tone.

"Oh? And where are you from Hired Gun?"

“North.”

“North is large and expansive, be more specific.”

“Equestria.”

Sighing she tried another line of questioning. “What happened to your leg.” She eyed my metal leg greedily as I heard shouts and complaints behind me. Steel Rangers were not tactful and not subtle. No wonder so many disliked them.

“Lost it.”

“How?” She stamped her hoof, obviously impatient.

“Shot.”

“With?”

“A bullet.”

Thinly held back rage flashed across her face as thinly veiled amusement flashed across mine. “You know. If I had reason to believe you were helping raiders or affiliated with a raider gang, I could have you arrested and strip that leg out from under you. Do not treat this as a game.”

“If.”

She laughed a bit. “I like you.” She turned away from, finally. “Tattle, Backlight. Report.”

“Nothing.” Both said in unison as they trotted up to her, the final not far behind.

“Well.” Blackwater said magically placing her helmet back on. “You're clean. Thank you for your cooperation.” They stood aside and let us pass. It wasn't until we were a ways away before they left their spot. Clearly they wanted to keep where they were going a secret, and their checkpoints random. Their strategy was clearly more effective, if more hostile.

Blood. So much blood. It soaked through my coat, painting it bright red. I tried to save her. I did. She was shot. Killed. I tried to avenge her, I did. I killed the fucker what killed her, and then his blood soaked me too. I ran, and kept running. One pony with a spear in his mouth, and gun on his flank blocked my way so he died too. My brother stood in front of me laughing, and I had to kill him. So much blood. I ran and ran until I could run no more.

Then I found the mirror hanging from the ceiling from a length of rope. I saw myself. Dripping in blood. I shook my head. No. I was under that blood. Silver Storm. Silver coat, white and pink mane, lavender eyes. I was there. I had to see myself. There was only blood; in the mirror even my eyes were red. Above the mirror was two words floating in air. “Hired Gun”. Gasping I stepped back.

The pony in the mirror reached out and touched me.

I did not wake up by jumping out of bed.

That never happens to anypony. If you thought that was going to happen, you've read too many stories and should be ashamed. I awoke slowly, my eyes filtering open. Firelight blinded my vision for a second, making my head pound. Blinking away the light, I strained to see. The waggons had been put at a perimeter around our little camp, and the fire made everything outside the circle nothing but blackness.

Groaning, I rolled onto my feet nearly falling when before I realized my metal limb didn't react. Looking down at the metal thing as I leaned heavily on my good right leg I noticed it wasn't glowing.

Had it been before? There was supposed to be a light or something... I really should have asked about its operation.

“Battery must have died... ”

I quickly turned leaning forward and going to bite for my bridle-trigger...which was not there. Because I was sleeping. And no pony sleeps with weapons on them.

From the darkness around the camp emerged the Doctor. “Just me, taking a piss. Sail is flying around, says the light round here makes it too hard to see.” He nickered at me, “Did you not think to ask how it works?”

“I assumed Science.”

“I... ” he stopped. I wasn't sure if he was going to laugh or cry, “That's the gist of it.” In the middle of the night, he launched into a near hour long lecture about proper cybernetic maintenance. The most important parts I'll summarize for the sake of being laconic, First: Recharge or change the battery every three days, second: Don't wear it while swimming, third: cover it up when it is raining, fourth: clean it regularly to make sure it does not rust, and finally: do not wear it if it is sparking. He also gave me instructions on how to actually remove the leg should I need to.

Having already lost one leg, and not wanting to lose the same one twice, I actually listened. I shock myself sometimes.

After I changed the battery, for the curious a small pack that could be removed from the leg near my shoulder with a small green light when charged, there were rocks to guard. Mine was the last shift, so after standing and looking at darkness I was treated to a long hike through the dreary brown wasteland. Then the Raiders came.

The rockets overhead deafened me.

In truth, I should have seen it coming. Things were going far too well for me. I'd survived the hell of Stable 42, met some ponies that didn't hate me, got my lost leg back, and even started building a new life for myself. Obviously, it was not to be.

Sail fell first. We'd been trudging along in the unbearable heat when he called out a warning. I looked up just in time to see a bullet burst through his wing in a spray of blood. He crashed too far away to save, and that's when they came. Quickly barking orders, I'd managed to form our waggons into a circular defensive barrier, but the wood walls were weak, and the raiders had the high ground. Even though everypony had managed to get in the circle of (except for Mischief, the poor colt...) three more of our group had fallen, and Morowynd was dying.

“Here,” I felt my mouth say, but my ears were still ringing too loud to hear anything. Pouring the last of the medical potions down Morowynd's throat he coughed up most of it. These supplies were supposed to go to needy villages, but fuck them. “Drink.”

“Heh...” The brown pony spat out the rest as my hearing returned treating my senses to a flurry of gunshots. “No...dying...” The idiot had tried to save Mischief. Ran out into open fire to the colt's corpse and got shot for his trouble. Blood was flowing down his chest when Sail somehow recovered from his crash and managed to draw all the fire on him. The distraction was enough for me to drag the Doc back into the 'safety zone', but it was for naught. Sail gave his life in an impressive last stand for a pony what was going to die anyway.

Dammit, is it too much to ask to save a *single* life sometime?

Of course, a voice in my head told me: heroes are dead; *survive*.

Bullets pierced the bottom of the tipped-over cart I was leaning behind making me near jump out of my skin. Leaving the dying doctor to rest, I inched my way over to the side of the barricade in the gap between waggons and peaked out. I fell back gagging. The colt. Mischief. Half eaten by carrion crows and half torn by the explosion that wracked his body. I wouldn't look. I couldn't. No thinking. Grieve later, it was time to kill. Leaning out I saw a target.

BANG. BANG.

The second shot wasn't mine. Something pounded into one of my guns throwing me off balance. Almost falling I instead rolled so I was behind the opposite barrier from before. Breathing heavy I swore. A lot. My rightmost gun was a bent and battered mess. My new fucking gun!

"Wont be long..." Lye said beside me. Damn, how did she do that. Turning her small green frame, she regarded me slightly. "They think we have something of theirs, else they would've used that launcher directly. They're biding their time, hoping we'll surrender..." Awww hell! Why didn't we just do that? "So they'll have an easier time killing us, after plundering whatever they're after."

"At least," I grunted as bullets rained down at our barricades, "They're efficient." And cautious. Even the Crimson Hoof would have just swarmed us and got it over with. These guys were worried about casualties. So either they were running low on murderers or were the most brotherly of all raiders. I hoped the former. Turning to Lye, I notice her barding had ripped, revealing an eye-shaped cutie mark. Hmm.

"Seeing." She explained when she noticed my staring, "My magic allows me to see through walls and buildings and the like," It didn't make her soft voice any easier to hear over the din, "Why?" Pulling the two grenades Pearly had given me as a present when I left her shack I looked to Lye. Her expressionless face threatened to smile. My shoulder burned as her horn and eyes glowed. Turning my back to where she was looking, her hoof motions directed me.

At a count of three, she tossed the first grenade behind me, and I bucked it as hard as I could. Seconds later an explosion echoed across the dusty hill lands making the remaining ponies huddled around the barricade jump. Useless, the whole lot of them. Only two had attempted to take up weapons, even after the raiders killed their family. One just kept muttering, "Watcher sees, Watcher sees, Watcher sees," over and over, and the rest sobbed or stayed deathly quiet. I was better off alone, or with Lye. Trying to save them was going to get me killed. "To the right, and not so hard," Lye instructed.

The second explosion was followed by a hail of screams, so I knew I did that one right. Lying low, I crawled over to Lye who had just turned her sight off. "They're useless." I motioned to huddled mass behind her. Only six, but that was all that was left of the caravan save me, Lye and the Doc. Shit. Turning swiftly I remembered leaving the Doc lying in blood. Inching over to his bloody body I touched the brown stallions head...dead. Shit.

"Of course they are." Lye had followed. Damn she was quiet. "Their leader is dead. They've never held a gun in their life. They know we are going to die." Heh. Dying was not in my game plan. I had already died once and it totally sucked.

"Cowards."

She raised an eyebrow at me, "In the face of such overwhelming odds, what would you propose?"

"Make them regret killing us."

"You're one of a kind."

I clopped my metal hoof on her shoulder, "Two." Her mouth opened as if to speak, but instead her eyes glowed, and she looked to the hill wherein the raiders were camped. "Wh-" -at is it? I had meant to ask. Screaming answered.

Four of the six scrambled towards me. All would have been dead if Lye hadn't chose that moment to stand up and lay some cover fire. I scrambled the past the herd to find the pony what had been muttering 'Watcher sees' missing a sizable chunk of his forehead. A purple mare with purple and pink hair wept over his body. "Come'on." I tried to touch her but she shrugged me off almost violently.

"No. Don't die. Please." I growled trying to tug on her tail, but she didn't notice, "Everything. I gave you." Her tears fell mixing with the blood on the ground. My stomach wrenched for her, but I kept pulling. Dying wasn't going to bring him back. "Please. We were going to have a child. You can't. Watcher sees. He wouldn't"

A shot rang through my ears.

Her body fell on top of him as the last of her tears hit the dirt.

I dropped beside them as more bullets rang overhead. Our 'barriers' had been shot to hell, looking more like swiss cheese than a barricade. They'd lasted longer than I had expected, in truth. Peeking over their bodies to the other side of the circle Lye stared at me, the remaining ponies huddled behind her small frame. With her huge gun hovering with magic above her head she spoke. I couldn't hear her words, but I could read her lips. "They come." Taking a deep breath... I nearly gagged from the smell of death.

Gritting my teeth, the rumble of raiders running down from their hill drowned out all noise. Turning my back to them I used all of my (considerable) strength to buck the remains of the waggon at them. There was a sickening crunch and a satisfying scream. Facing the horde I shot the first thing I saw: A yellow unicorn with a pink mane. His head exploded into the faces of his comrades. Taste that raiders? That's death. You'll get your fill soon enough.

More came streaming over and I could hear the blasts of Lye's gun to my left. I didn't look. No time. Shooting again, I dropped a pony charging me to her knees. The second shot entered her neck. She probably died, but I never bothered to check. Running and jumping over her, I careened into another. Before I had a chance to think, he managed to wrestle me to my back. My battle shrunk to the two of us.

His hoof pressed into my forehead pushing it hard to the ground. Involuntarily grunting in pain, I managed to untangle my metal leg. I rolled my eyes to see a serrated knife in his red maw. Fuck. My heart kept pounding. His knife moved closer. My metal hoof cracked against his skull, and the knife fell from his grip. I struck again and he fell off me. I found myself on top of him. His face was purpling. Why. Oh. My metal leg was pressed into his neck. Blood bubbled around where the metal bit into him, and he gave one last wheeze for air before dying.

I stood.

The screams and scent blood hit me. Turning I saw Lye backed into a corner by six ponies as the last of the survivors died nosily. *Walk away*, Hired Gun told me. Saving her would just get me killed. All around me ponies were dead and dying, one more body wouldn't change that. Walk away when nopony's looking. *Survive*.

Her gun clicked. Empty. I charged. I took the first one from behind, lifting her up with my head and throwing her to the ground. Shots rang. Biting into me. Even as blood ran down my body, I didn't care. I shot until I ran out of bullets. Killing some. Wounding others. I bashed the head of one who still had their gun magically pointed at Lye. My joint burned. I was too late.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Lye's head exploded into bloody chunks.

Now I was dead. Too many. I should have ran. *Survive*.

I backed up. The Raiders were dark, dirty, and covered in blood. The way they circled me, guns bristling, made it seem like they were one body. A single raider entity that encompassed all the separate dirty parts until one of them broke the circle.

A single earth buck. His mane and coat were a uniform brown, save for a single streak of black in his mane and tail. Green eyes regarded me warily a frown dancing on his lips as his tail whisked back and forth behind him. "You."

"Me." I agreed.

I did so love it when raiders glared at me. He wore no armoured barding, showing his grey chain cutie mark proudly. On his back was a battle saddle with a single scoped rifle. The urge to kill rose suddenly. I had to dig my hooves into the ground so as not to strike out. Sail. Doctor Morowynd. Mischief. Lye. He killed them all. My friends, or almost.

"You have caused me a lot of trouble," he measured his words behind carefully concealed rage, "And now you stand here. Drenched in the blood of my men. Surrounded. Any last words?" All I could think about was the smell of blood. So many ponies had died here, and for what? Was I just to stand here and let him win? I couldn't fight them all. My body was weak, and my wounds seeping blood. If only I could rest I could fight.

The voice in my head screamed, *Survive!*

I asked, "You hiring?"

Footnote: Level Up!

New Implant!: Intelligence Implant, Intl +1

New perk!: Dash Speed Reload: All your weapons reload 20% faster.

Quest perk!: Legless: Strength +1 DT +1 Unarmed + 10.

S.P.E.C.I.A.L note: Your strength is jacked up to 11!

Skill Notes: Unarmed 50

(A/N: A special thanks to Kkat for building an awesome world. This chapter was brought to you by my awesome editor theBSDude(who is awesome), and the TVTropes 'infodumping'.)

Chapter 2: The Last Thing You Never See

"You take out a debt; it's only a matter of time before someone comes collecting."

My cell leaked. A. Lot. I managed to keep my leg dry by curling up in a corner. It was uncomfortable, but then again, it was a cell. Expecting anything else was just asking for trouble. To be quite frank, I could have escaped. The cell was little more than a huge iron cage shoved in the corner of the room, and I was strong. *very* strong. If I had been pressed, I could easily have bent the bars and escaped. Into a raider base without a gun. My strength was good, true enough, but not near enough to take a raider base by myself.

Actually, my wounds stung so badly I wasn't sure I could even bend the bars. In the final melee that ended with my surrender, I had managed to take no less than five bullets. Though three just grazed me, stinging only a little, and one had bounced off my leg, the other was buried deep in my flank. The Raider 'doctor' removed it and gave me a healing potion. Given the taste, I suspected he'd pissed in it. Unsurprisingly, I was not a very popular pony. Maybe if I wore blood-soaked rags with spikes sticking out, these folks would like me better.

Just outside my bars ponies were laughing and gambling. Poker, it looked like. Leaning in a bit, I ignored the water that dripped on my head and wet my mane. Four raiders were sitting on their haunches around a table. Unicorns, the lot of them. Holding up cards magically so as to make my joint burn. Sure, I wasn't perceptive, but I wasn't foalish enough not to notice fact that the joint between my fake leg and shoulder burning every time a unicorn used magic. Starmetal poisoning, I guessed.

The mare with the bloody dagger cutie-mark put two cards down, and the old green stallion gave her two more. Bets were placed, and two of them folded outright. When the cards fell, it was the quiet filly (without a cutie mark!) who won the round with a three of a kind, netting her a whole pile of caps. The next few rounds she dropped out, sipping on whiskey (who gives whiskey to a filly?), but the round after she managed to get another pile by making everypony else drop out. Bluffing. Pearly told me what it was, but I hadn't understood till I saw it. Don't show your cards, and always pretend they were good, but not unbeatable.

Or something.

"Whiskey," I suggested when the bloody dagger mare looked at me. Instead, she magically chucked an empty bottle which shattered and blanketed my cell with glass. Great. "No, then." Sighing, I rolled back into my corner as thunder roared outside. My flank pounded as the flesh knitted itself back together, and my joint burned from the magic. Most of all, my head throbbed, and guilt wrenched my gut. I had managed to negotiate my freedom, but at what cost? *Survival*. My head roared like the thunder outside.

They had killed the doctor who had saved my life. They had killed an innocent child, left his body torn and his... no, I couldn't think of that. Even still. I had gained my life by offering to work for them. The brown stallion with the chain for a cutie mark called himself "Silver Bullet." I told him the name was fake. He told me mine was. Yet, he brought me along as captive to his little raider den anyway. He was going to request of me a job, and with it, I'd truly see if my will to survive overruled the stupid morality that nagged at me.

"You." The filly who had been winning at cards was standing outside my cage, looking down to where I lay. I guess the game was over, and judging by the way the bags on her back swelled with caps, I

figured she'd0 won. "What's your name?"

"Hired Gun."

"Whats your *real* name?" Silver Storm... The filly's voice was sweet... but living with a raider company, I guessed she wasn't. Filly or no, I could trust her none at all.

"Hired Gun."

She giggled and trotted in a circle, "I'm Spitshine," she announced proudly, "an' you're my prisoner." It sure looked that way. "Youse gotta tell the truth, or I'll kill ya."

"No."

That only made her giggle more. "I'm going to be big and strong one day, so you better do what I say. And smart. All the ponies say I'm smart. Are *you* smart? 'Course not, because *you* are trapped. Smart ponies don't get trapped; they're the trappers." Lightning flashed through a window and thunder boomed.

Spitshine jumped and squealed.

How could I not chuckle at that? "S-shuddup. That was a trick! I'm not really scared! I-" Thunder boomed again and she vanished, running to hide behind 'bloody dagger' mare. Chuckling, I gave 'bloody dagger' my very best grin.

Her face darkened. "Scare Spitshine again, and I'll bugger you with my knife." She looked deadly serious

Okay, no talking it was then.

The rest of that night was spent counting my sins as I watched 'bloody dagger' sharpen her knife. At least the Cutie-mark she had was well-earned. From the look of her knife, it had seen use many, many times. In case we ever fought, I mentally noted to stay as far away as possible and pump her full of lead before she got close. Hopefully, it'd never come to that. That little filly Spitshine seemed to take to 'bloody dagger', and even if she was a raider in training, taking a filly away from her friend was harsh. If I had to, I would, but I'd take no pleasure in it.

Maybe that was the point, I thought resting my head on the iron bars. The wasteland bid you do what you gotta in order to survive, but... but if you started taking pleasure in the dirty business, the wasteland won. Even if you had to resort to dirty work, you could never let yourself enjoy it. Somehow, I knew this epiphany was going to come in handy sooner rather than later. When I was blindfolded and marched to their little hideout, I promised to do whatever job he needed. I was just a gun for hire after all. Eventually, he was going to cash in on that, and I wasn't going to like it.

My stomach twisted in a knot.

When morning came, the rain still pounded on the windows, and there was a good-sized pool in my cell. Getting to my feet, I stretched out as much as I could, my metal shoulder aching a bit. It had been since the rain started, but sleeping made it worse. "Water." Bloody dagger was staring through the bars at me. Sneaky bitch. Oh, but she was giving me water, how nice. As I drank from the bottle, my pipbuck went clicky-clack.

Wait, what?

Leaning down, I poked it with my nose. Still clicking. That was annoying. What the hell happened to it? All I wanted was my radio back. Still clicking. By Celestia's beard! Stop clicking!

Okay, Silver Storm may have taken over my because I smashed the stupid thing against the steel bars.

“Ain’t that a kick in the head~”

It worked though. Except, I had never heard that song before, and DJ PON-3 only had like ten songs. Then, as if to taunt me the song stopped and a DJ spoke. ‘Cept it wasn’t DJ PON-3. It was some older stallion with a voice like honey poured over thunder. *“Sometimes the only thing you can do after a kick to the head is get back up. How are we doing today, Dise? Because it’s time for the news,”* Instead of excitement bordering on dash-addiction, this pony was smooth, suave, and...damn that voice. He could talk to me all day long.

“After a failed raid of the Megaspell power station, the Mustangs are denying all responsibility. Their leader Roy had this to say, ‘Listen folks; I tells ya it weren’t us, no way no how. Celestia above knows me and The House have always been friends, and I ain’t never betray that trust.’” Wow. I had heard a lot of untrustworthy ponies in my time, but that? Yeah, so I knew one thing for sure: the Mustangs attacked a power station. *“When asked about the noticeable downsize in Mustang forces on the streets Roy declined to comment. One more piece of news for you. A Traveller from the north was found near the town of Bridle Hope in critical condition. After emergency surgery by a Watcher Disciple, she reportedly made a full recovery. It just goes to show that there is goodness in everypony, if you know where to look.”* After a short segue music resumed leaving me dumbfounded.

I was on the radio. Oh joy. Dr Morowynd was too. And now he was dead. Maybe that was the wastelands way of punishing him for taking back a life it had so dutifully claimed. Well, that ruined my euphoria. Slinking back to my almost dry corner I sighed, my chest heaving involuntarily. How come everypony I liked died? Except for Pearly, but hell, there was still time yet.

“Whiskey?” I asked ‘bloody dagger’, prompting her to glare... uh... daggers at me. Water was good and all, but whiskey was best.

“Just drink. Bullet wants to see you.”

So I drank. My pipbuck still made that clicking sound, but it was drowned out by music. Were they going to escort me to Bullet’s chambers? Were they aware the last raider I parlayed with got a kick out a window? Of course, that was Silver Storm not me. Me? I was going to actually listen to what this bastard had to say. Also, I would refrain from calling him a bastard to his face.

They unlocked my cage, but not before having four more guards (and Spitshine) flanked me. At least two had their weapons trained on me at all times. If I hadn’t known better, I’d’a thought I was dangerous.

The little tour of their base took me through darkened rooms of horrid smells. At one point, an errant lightning bolt lit one of the rooms up fully. Only for a second...I was glad for that, any longer and I would have retched. Ponies should not be inside out. Maybe they were actually taking me out back to shoot me. That’d be nice. Better than actually working for these monsters at least.

They finally led me to a clean room. Sitting behind a desk, writing something with the pen in his mouth, was Silver Bullet. “Leave us.” Good idea. I sat on my haunches facing him as the guards filed out. “Don’t try anything stupid.” he said when the door slammed shut behind me.

“Kay.”

“Were you serious?” he asked, leaning his head forward, “You would really work for me?”

“Yes.” I said as quick as I could, adding, “But I don’t mutilate ponies.”

He chuckled a bit getting to his feet. “Good. I took over this... ‘operation’ two months ago. It went rogue and turned raider when no pony was looking. Soon, there will be no more mutilation, but my...

urgh... herd don't understand just yet. In time though.”

“Good.”

“I never said we were doing 'good'. Just... less gruesome work.” He sighed walking closer to me but keeping a good ten-foot distance. “I have a job for you. Somepony in Bridle Hope has... stolen something that belongs to me.” He turned and paced dramatically showing off his grey-chain cutie mark.

“You need it back.” Of course. Theft for a gang of raiders. Seems like fun. I’d preformed guard duty for raiders for years and that never bothered me. The Silver Storm in me demanded justice for the doctor. But the doctor was dead, and joining him in the grave did nothing for nopony.

“I need her fucking dead.”

“Why me?” I could kill her. My stomach heaved at the thought of being this bastard’s bloody executioner, but it was that or death, and by the sounds of it this mare had asked for it. *What if he wants you to kill Pearly?* my conscience asked. I ignored it. It wouldn't be. Kill some bitch... still. Argh, fuck the wasteland. Kill or die. What a choice.

“My bucks would make a fucking botch of it. Would kill half the damn village or set it on fire. Without Bridle Hope, trade would be fucked up from here to Wendin, and that’s bad for everypony. It's the centre between north and south and east and west. If the villagers left, or if, goddess forbid, the NCA or Steel Ranger took the opportunity to procure the town... no. She needs to die and JUST her.”

“Didn't answer my question.”

“Because you're available? Because you're a good shot? Because your life is already indebted to me? Because finding another would take too long? Take your pick. If I had my way, I'd have you killed... but only an idiot lets tools go to waste.” A tool. That's all I was. A tool for some raider to use and throw away.

Buck, was I a tool.

“And the reward?”

“Freedom, if you want it. A full-time job if you like the work.”

“I'll need caps.” If I was going to... actually do this, I may as well make it worth my while. “And a gun. For shooting.” He grinned.

The next hour or so was hammering out a deal. He did most of the talking, but I said a lot more. Eventually, I managed to get a deal for a new gun, armoured barding, and 800 caps. Half now, half on completion. All that in addition to my freedom, which I figured was priceless. Back in Marefort, Wildfire often handled the bartering, and more than once she demanded I come with her, so I guess I must have picked up a trick or two.

Of course... all this was for killing another pony. I had killed ponies before, sure, but this was different...those ponies were raiders and my target was just...

Don't think about it. Do it. Kill or die. *Survive.*

When I was a little filly, I’d hated the rain. I liked to run and play outside, but when the rain came, I was cooped inside Marefort like a bird in a cage. Then my mother had told me that the rain was actually Celestia's tears. That the Goddess wept for her forlorn children and wept for what had brought them to such a place. I didn’t like the rain any more after that, but I felt like I understood it.

Celestia's tears poured from the heavens. I could barely see three feet in front of me, and the strands of my white-and-pink-stripped mane falling in my face did not help. Though it did remind me I needed a manecut. Sighing, I stopped, my hooves sinking deeper into the mud. Lifting my right leg up, I poked my pipbuck with my nose.

Silver Bullet had come from a stable, he said, and knew how to work the thing. Somepony, the Doctor maybe, must have fixed the thing when I was dead. It had a thousand and one uses, Bullet had told me. Maps, inventory management, radio, something called SATS, and a Geiger counter, among other functions. I didn't know what half that shit was, but the map and radio were useful.

It had been a long haul from Raider Base Camp back to Bridle Springs, but not as slow as it had been leaving. On my own, I could traverse ground much more quickly, mostly because I could climb steep hills and other stuff carts couldn't. Still, with my mind bearing down on me with all the weight of a Bighorner, it felt like it took twice the time it did. I was so lost in my mind that I didn't see the building until I ran head-first into it.

Choking down curses, I searched through the grey rainy haze to get my bearings. According to my pipbuck map I was at the Casino. Good. From here I could--

"No, Not a word," Shit! Voice closing in. My heart leaped into my throat. Catching the sight of a large crate against the wall, I quickly dove behind it praying to Luna that whoever was coming by wasn't observant enough to see me. "I know, I know. I just worry, so don't give me that."

"Daisy, calm down. I'm sure they're fine," a stallion said.

"Fine!?" her voice turned shrill as the hoof-steps closed in. "We lost two caravans last week! Raiders, slavers... and worse live in those hills. Being a Watcher caravan don't mean two shits that far away from Dise."

"Yeah, yeah. And the Mayor sent word to the NCA, and you know how they are. Desperate to 'improve relations' so they set up a camp."

"I know... still... I wish they'd write. Or get that Pegasus to write a letter or... something." She sighed heavily, her voice disturbingly close. "So this is it?"

"Yup, just came yesterday. Pearly said'a stash it back here till she can round some folks up to put it together."

"Think it'll actually work?"

"Galician approved, they use the same model." The mare chuckled. Somepony knocked on the opposite side of the crate. Holding my breath, I refused to move. Luckily, due to the rain, they didn't linger that long, eventually filling away the way they came. Taking a deep sigh of relief, I peeked out behind my cover. Nothing but raindrops and dirt.

Creeping out, I walked down the hill where I came, and travelled in a wide circle before I hit the lower town. Given the rain and the fact the casino was most likely the only building that didn't leak, I assumed most, if not all, of the town ponies would be there. I eventually found myself pressed against a broken-down building.

No noise. I quickly pushed open the back door of the house, my eyes scanning for signs of life. I was almost positive the house was uninhabited, but I had to be sure. I was almost mostly correct, as it was inhabited but by giant crickets. Giant, of course, compared to regular crickets. After squashing them, I climbed the crumbling staircase to find most of the top floor open to the elements as a good portion of the roof has been torn off. Trotting quickly under the section of the roof that managed to stay up I leaned against a wall. I was safe from the rain here, time to think.

First things first, though. Using my teeth, I managed to unzip my metal leg's protective covering. It was little more than a plastic bag designed to keep the prosthetic dry, and it looked even uglier than the skeletal leg underneath. Lifting the leg up to eye level, I could hear the whirling and ticking of its internal components. I laid down on the floor so as I could use the light of my pip-buck to get a better look without, you know, falling over.

It really was an impressive bit of technology. Sure, from a distance it looked like somepony had dipped my skeleton in adamantium and let me walk around on it, but up close its true genius shown through. There were wires so thin you could barely see them as they traced up and down the leg, and at the joints, if you squinted, you could see the gears and springs that kept the leg moving and natural looking. The doctor told me they'd used magic to actually attach it to my nervous system so I could control the whole thing mentally. Stretching it out, I marvelled at the ease of movement, wondering how I never noticed how amazing it was before. Oh yeah, I hated it because I lost my real fucking leg.

Sighing, I pulled the covering back on and fastened it. It made me wonder why they didn't just build water proof legs. I turned the radio on but kept it low as the rain started to lighten up outside my little enclave. From my vantage I couldn't really see much of the town. The Casino and Clinic on its' hill were clear of course, and from the light coming out of it, it looked bursting with life. Good, the fewer the better.

"... Fires continue to rage. Meanwhile in the Dise wasteland, I have been getting reports that a slaver company has taken to attacking trading caravans in the east in brazen daylight raids. NCA officials, who have pledged to solve the Slaver problem, had this to say. 'It seems to me the Slavers have responded to the NCA crack-down by ramping up their vileness. We'll flush them out of their caves soon enough and bring enlightenment to the Dise Wasteland. You can bet on it.'" The radio whispered to me as I thought.

I was almost positive my target would be at their house, and not out at the casino. A stroke of good fortune if you asked me. Even still I couldn't barge in, take the shot, grab the loot and leave. She'd scream, and people would come running, I needed to hit her from a distance. Chewing on my lip I juggled ideas on how, where and when in my head. It was easier than thinking.

"In other news, riots have broken out when Ponitrons showed up to quell a protest in front of the Black Salamander Casino and Research Center. So far there thirteen protesters have been injured, three killed, and another five missing along with at least a dozen Ponitrons in need of repair. Both the Hizais and Galicians have yet to comment on this recent incident. Well, I..." I turned the volume down so much it was nothing but a faint murmur to my ear. I couldn't risk being heard.

Lightning flashed across the sky, and two seconds later a boom shook the house so much I thought it was going to cave in around me. Time to act. Crawling back down the slippery steps, I walked out into the town, keeping myself wary. Even though the town felt abandoned, I snuck my way around. If even a single person saw me, they might recognize me, and then I was dead.

The rain had become so light I couldn't tell if it was rain, or simply a thick mist. Whatever the case, it didn't help my mane get any dryer and made my tail stick to my flank in a most uncomfortable fashion. Ignoring it, I finally made my way to my destination: the abandoned school house.

I pushed down on the handle. Locked. As thunder boomed above, I kicked the door open. Walking in, I quickly stomped two more giant bugs to death before searching for the stairs leading to the bell-tower. I didn't even hear her walk in behind me.

"Hired Gun..." Her voice was strangely soft as she stood there. Lightning flashed behind her illuminating her white coat making it look beautiful and drenched.

“Pearly...” I responded dimly aware of the new gun pressing into my side. Backing up I never took my gaze away from her. My stomach twisted itself into knots yet again. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make any other words form on my lips. “Pearly.” I repeated.

“What the hell is going on here? Where's everypony else? An' what's with that gun? Ain't one of the two you brought with you.” She just had to go and point everything wrong with what was going on, didn't she? Was my head supposed to hurt so much?

“Don't ask. Leave.” I said, the wavering in my voice betraying my attempt at confidence.

“Why? Hon, I-” She walked towards me.

“You shouldn't be here.” I insisted, backing up and knocking desks over behind me.

“What. The. Fuck.”

“I'm not a good pony.” I tried to explain as truthfully as I could. “But you knew that.”

“So what? What the hell happened. Why are you here? Where is everypony? What the fuck do you think you're doin' sneaking around?”

“I...” Stopped. There was no point lying, she'd find out soon enough. “Dead.” She stepped back, shock clear on her face. “Raiders came. We fought. Then died. I'm sorry.”

“You... why're you still alive? Did'ja escape or..” Or was I working for them? She didn't need to finish the question for me to understand, and I didn't need to reply for her to. She already knew the answer I was sure. Why did she torture herself like this? I didn't want her to know. She... I had hoped never to see her again. She was such a good pony, and I wasn't. “Why... they killed them all, and now you're working for them?”

“Needed caps.”

“So that is it?” Goddess, she looked like she was about to cry. “You'd work for murders if you got caps? I thought you were...”

“Hired Gun.” She stopped, and glared at me. My heart may have broken then. “My name. It's who I am.”

“You're a monster.” Maybe. But on a scale from one to abomination, I was near the bottom. “So you're here as an assassin? IS that it?! Going to kill some fucking pony?! Some innocent-”

“Innocent?” I smiled sadly at her. Goddess, she was beautiful, and a lot smarter than me, but if she truly believed anypony was innocent in the wasteland, she was the biggest foal I had ever met.

“Oh, you're a judge now? An executioner too to carry out the sentence? Is that it?”

“If that's what it takes.”

“When did you get so cold?” I shivered. When did this room get so cold was a better question. Damn. This was going badly.

“Survival. The world sucks. Good ponies die. Bad ponies piss on the graves of heroes. Only thing I can do is survive.” That may have been the longest string of words I had used since before I left Marefort the first time, and by far the most meaningful. It was necessary though. She had to understand.

“You...” She choked up. “Shoulda figured. No pony with hope left would change their name like yours... so what happened to you? Doc said you were beat up bad when he found you. Rival gang get you? Mark gone wrong? Drug dealers? What?”

“My brother shot me.” Maybe if I told her the truth. Then she would get it. It was stupid. I could have

lied, pacified her until I could complete the job. But I never lied to another pony.

“Your brother.” Her voice was somewhere in between disbelief and sadness.

“Yes.” The whole room brightened as lightning flashed.

“Why?”

“I tried to rescue him.” Now she was laughing at me. Or crying. Tears were streaming down her face. But she was laughing, though I could barely hear her over the sound of rolling thunder.

“Ya expect me ta believe your brother shot ya. After tryin' ta save him?” Was it really that ridiculous?

“You're a fuckin' liar. So why are you really here? ‘Cause that raider bullshit ain't foolin' me.”

“It's true.”

“Then...” She wiped her tears away with her hoof. “I'll just have to stop you, 'fore you kill some pony.” Sighing, I shook my head. Suddenly, 800 caps didn't seem like a deal anymore. No amount of caps could would be enough if I had to fight Pearly. My shoulder burned more painfully than it ever had before, when she lifted her shotgun off her back and pointed it at me.

“You can't,” She started opening her mouth but I cut her off. “I mean physically. I'm bigger. Stronger. And a faster shot. You'll die.”

“To save somepony. Worth a shot.”

“You don't even know who I'm killing...”

The rain had all but stopped, leaving only the thinnest hint pouring down on me. Looking through the scope of my newly obtained bolt-action sniper rifle, I could see the silhouette of my target on their window. Just a candlelight shadow though, I couldn't take the shot, not yet. I moved the rifle, looking at Pearly as she finally made it back to her farm. It had been surprisingly easy to convince her to leave once I told her who I was killing. Feuds were not my forte, but this one clearly ran deep.

Sighing, I turned back to my mark. From my vantage point on the school bell-tower (notably lacking a bell), I had full line of sight over the whole town. Like I had suspected, only two ponies were in the town, the rest were in the Casino gambling away what few caps they had. If I could be anywhere right now, it'd be there, or in Pearly's shack, or beside Wildfire...

I shook the thought out of my head.

No thinking.

A yellow streak tore across the sky. Counting under my breath, I looked through the scope. “Three... two... one” thunder boomed. My mark's window blew open suddenly so loud I thought I heard the clattering. Lightning broke the sky again, like clockwork. “Three... two...” Her head appeared in the window, trying desperately to close the window. “One.” Thunder boomed in my ears. I didn't bite down, I didn't shoot.

Shoot! My mind cried out at me, *Shoot. Kill!*

I tried. With all my heart I did. But... dammit. I couldn't see my mark, all I could see is Wildfire her face a bloody ruin as she died. My stomach heaved. Retching, I cursed myself. I had to do this. I knew. But...

Lightning flashed.

I peered through my scope. She got the window. She was closing it. All I had to do was take the shot. "Three." I'd never have an easier shot. She was right there. A single bullet and it would be done. The wasteland would have another body and I, my freedom. "Two" DO it! Shoot. How hard could it be. I'm not a raider; raiders did this shit for fun. I took no pleasure in it. It's different. But I...

Survive, A voice inside me whispered.

"One." The thunder masked my bullet.

Thus ended the life of Nanny Jane.

I didn't move for a long time. I just stood there, staring through the scope of my rifle. Her head had snapped back when the bullet hit, and blood sprayed out behind her. I couldn't see her now though. Her corpse had fallen, hidden. In my mind she was there though; lying in a pool of blood with half her face torn off. Telling me she was sorry-

Maybe death would have been better. Was this really the only two choices the Wasteland had? Die a hero, or live a villain. Maybe that's why there were so few good ponies left, all of them had died out or had the goodness beaten out. I tried to be a good pony once. For that I lost my L... I lost my Wildfire. My leg. My *family*. My home. So now I'm a bad pony. An assassin. It made me lose something else. My heart felt cold, like it was missing something. Something important. No matter what you did you lost. Fuck the wasteland. Fuck the zebras and ponies what made it, too. Maybe one day I'd learn the name of them what caused the apocalypse so I could damn them each to hell personally.

Then after I died I'd meet them there.

I took my time going down the winding steps of the bell-tower. I toyed briefly with the idea of falling down the stairs to my death. No less than I deserved. Still I kept walking down the slicks steps and never tripped. Did my gun always feel this heavy, burrowing into my side? I couldn't be sure. I choked back emotion. I just had to walk. Don't think, move.

I made it to the school room where me and Pearly had our little, 'showdown'. She was right of course. Killing Nanny Jane was a mistake. Dying would have been better. Beat the wasteland; don't let it beat you. Die on your own terms; not live in its. After taking so much from me, did it really manage to take more?

Did the wasteland take my soul?

Celestia's tears fell with renewed vigour soaking me to the bone. Only my metal leg stayed dry, and I couldn't even feel it. Moping about the rain? Yeah, I was a bit depressed. Slogging through mud, rain and everything else I finally made it to the Bridle Hope General Store. For a second, I nearly knocked, until I remembered what was on the other side.

So I kicked open the door. Maybe somepony heard, but I really did not care. On the other side, I saw her.

The wounds were so similar I was sure it was the wasteland mocking me. The way her head was torn, the blood. Tears blurred my vision but that only made them look even more alike. I kept looking though. Forcing myself to. I watched as the blood dripped from her corpse into the pool. I saw the ripples the blood made like rain falling on a lake. The way one eyes rolled back, and the other was dangling off the side of her head, yes I saw that too. This. I caused this. Maybe I was a bad pony. Maybe I was a killer, assassin, or whatever. But I was not a raider. A raider watching this would laugh, where as I could only cry. They'd revel in it, whereas I could only retch again.

I was sick. I was horrible. Evil, vile and a thousand other things, but at least I could have been worse. I

had to keep reminding myself. My shoulder burned, mocking what I'd done. Still, I looked. I didn't stop looking until I felt the rising urge to retch again. The food the raiders served me before I left was gross enough going in, coming out it was twice as bad.

Tearing my eyes away I breathed deeply.

"Right... package." I flicked the radio of my pip-buck back on and got to searching. Silver Bullet told me I would know what I was looking for when I saw it, but he was kind of an ass. Having no idea what this package was I searched aimlessly, and when I found something good (including a healing potion and three grenades) I threw it in my saddle bags. No sense letting it go to waste. I had just killed a mare, okay? Don't think too bad of me for something as minor as theft. Or grave robbing, whatever.

Still nothing. Until I saw the door to the back. Of course! Nanny Jane told me not to look in there before. It'd only make sense that whatever she stole to send a raider assassin on her tail would have to be locked away. More proof of my idiotic-ness if doing a job for an obviously-evil raider band wasn't proof enough.

That door was locked too. Sure, I could have found the key on Nanny Jane but... I couldn't bring myself to look again. So instead I kicked the door down. It may have been my imagination, but I thought I heard something squeak when it crashed open.

The stairs twisted deep underground. Dark, dirty and dusty. Turning I grabbed the candle holder from a nearby desk with my mouth and made my descent. As I walked, the candle light made my shadow danced along the walls. For a second, my shadow looked small and afraid, and then huge with sharp teeth. Never for long though, as the candle flickered wildly.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, the candle fell from my mouth.

The package, I realized instantly. Such a light pink it could almost be mistaken for white had the light not illuminated further. It was chained to wall. She was a filly.

The package Nanny Jane stole was a little filly.

Footnote: Level Up!

Skill Notes: Guns 50

(A/N: Thank you first and foremost to Kkat without whom this story would never exist. A very special thanks to theBSDude for his effort in making this shit readable. ~No One~)

Chapter 3: Bullets And Brainwaves

“We were making a table?”

The filly didn't talk.

After I snapped the chain that bound her to the floor, she just stared at me with those big grey eyes of hers. When I moved to leave, she got up and followed, her eyes trained on me but still never speaking. Even as we sneaked our way out of town she followed. Hiding when I hid, moving when I moved, and still as quiet as a mouse. Walking through the darkness, we only had the sound of my radio to keep the silence from engulfing us.

“The Pro-Restriction group that held last night’s protest that turned violent. ‘Celestia’s Vision’ has denounced the events saying that while they oppose the inequine research of the Hizais, violence was just stooping to their level. They also called for what they called, ‘an internal investigation’ on who in the Galicians ordered the Ponitrons to fire. Once again the Hizai and Galicians have refused to comment. In these times of trouble, let’s not forget how good we in Dise have it. Have you ever felt lonely even with ponies all around? Here’s Odyssey telling you what that’s like, brought to you by The Moon Casino. Have you been naughty, and need to be punished? Come to The Moon, the best place to be banished.”

“Luna, won’t you cry for me. I’m as lonely as I’ve ever been...”

Sighing, I stopped. Grey clouds still blanketed the sky, and Celestia had not stopped crying. Still, it had been a long night, and my whole body ached. It’d take half a day to walk to the meeting place, and we weren't scheduled there until the next evening. As the sun peaked over hills I found us a small cave and lay down. “What's your name?”

The filly lay down across from me, never speaking. Her coat was a light pink, so light it could have been white, and her yellow mane and tail was splotched with patches of red that looked like stains. On her left hind leg she still wore the shackle that had chained her to the ground because whenever I tried to take it off she moved away. Her eyes stood out the most though. Children shouldn't look so sad. “Serenity...” Her voice was almost a whisper.

She hated me, I realized at once. Her whole life was probably jumping from one slaver to another, and to her I was just transferring her to another prison. Which was true. I couldn't help wondering who her parents were. Did slavers kill them before taking her? Did they leave her in the wasteland? Did they sell her? I would never know the answer. The wasteland had but little, but it had never lacked for orphans. “I'm Hired Gun.”

Goddess, would she please stop staring at me. I didn't want this... but I was hired for a job, and dammit I had to see it to the end. I mean if Spitshine could eke out a living in their gang, Serenity could. It wouldn't be so bad, right? Funny. I’d thought I was better at lying to myself, but I just couldn't make myself believe it. “Where do you come from?”

Her sad eyes regarded me, before turning her head away. “Dise.”

“Was it nice there?” I tried to smile at her, to reassure her that everything was going to be alright.

“No.”

I woke up at what I assumed to be noon, though I couldn't really tell with the sun hidden behind the clouds. I rolled to my feet, smiling as I realized the rain had finally stopped. Ripping off the cover to my metal leg, I trotted over to Serenity poking her with said prosthetic. Groaning, the filly rolled over.

"Get Up." We had a schedule to meet. "Now." I punctuated my statement with another poke to the gut.

Finally she opened her eyes, and gasped. "Omigosh!" Jumping to her feet, she walked under me and weaved between my legs as she circled my prosthetic. "A Series 19-B Model Cybernetic Leg with a custom leg extender. I've never seen a working model, wow!" Great, apparently my leg was out-of-date tech. "These were the height of technology back before the war! Some purists say they're still the best for their customization." Customi-what?

"You like this sort of thing?" She stopped dead in her tracks and turned her head to me. In an instant the jubilation in her eyes fell to a dead gloom. My face does that to fillies. More-so to fillies I am about to sell to a raider band of questionable integrity.

"Yes." Her eyes fell to the ground.

There was no point pressing the issue. Of course she hated me. For such a cute little thing she managed to hate as well as the best of them. I deserved it.

The road was long, winding and filled with rocks. The only sounds were breathing, hoof-beats, the metal clang of my leg and my radio. The DJ must have been sick, or sleepy, as it was just the same series of maybe a dozen songs playing on repeat. Not bad songs per se, but without his voice to break them up, their repetition got a bit...irritating. Not to mention how much I love that voice of his.

"What's that?" A small voice said so suddenly I nearly jumped. I spun quickly to see she was staring at a small wooden door chiseled into the side of a sheer cliff. Trotting a bit closer I poked at the door with my metal hoof. It look familiar. I was sure I had seen a door like this before.

I rested my hoof on the door. "A Stable." I was sure of it. Stable 42 had a door like this that lead to the main stable and its great cog-like barrier. Another stable. Goddess I hated these things. I had only known one in my whole life and it had been where everything that could have gone wrong did. So here stood another, in the middle of what might have been my biggest moral failing, mocking me. Closing my eyes, I could hear Wildfire whisper to me, telling me how wrong I was. I shook my head violently.

Wildfire was dead. And might I remind myself she died doing the right thing, and if I was so eager to join her in the grave following her example would make that happen. Sure as I could spit, running now would just get us killed. Fuck it. I was hired to do a job and, for good or ill, I was going to finish the damn job.

"A stable." I set my hoof back down. "Let's go."

We got to the meeting place a few hours late. The crest of a small hill beset with rocks. Two great hunks of stone were positioned on either side of the hill, each with a sniper trained on me. Maybe he didn't trust me. Across the way came trotting up Silver Bullet, his brown coat as dirty as his soul. Trotting by his side was the mare I knew as 'Bloody Dagger'

"You're late." Oh good, he can tell the time.

"Whatever." His face showed the slightest hint of a smile. On his flank I could see his grey chain cutie-mark showing proudly. Stomping for a second, he looked to one of the rocks where a sniper stood, and then to the other. Subtle. Real subtle.

"Where is she?" I side stepped showing off Serenity. My heart wrenched for her, really it did. She was

lying on the ground and visibly shaken with her yellow and red-splotched hair covering her eyes; tears fell from beneath her hair splashing onto the dirt. Celestia, what was I doing? Walking behind her I gently touched her shoulder.

“It's time.” From one cell the next. To Serenity's credit she wiped her eyes dry, got up on all fours and trotted slowly to Silver Bullet's side. Her grey eyes were fixed on me though. Begging me.

But a deal was a deal and would be until I got paid. “You never told me.”

“I didn't think it mattered.” he tilted his head quizzically. Beside him, 'Bloody Dagger' just glared at me. Apparently, she had never gotten over me laughing at Spitshine once. Spitshine. Yeah. I'm sure her and Serenity could be friends. “A package is a package; don't matter how it's wrapped.”

If I told you that just then I realized he was a slaver, I hope you don't think me any stupider than usual. It all made sense. He'd claimed his group had turned raider, and there was his cutie mark. It looked so much like the chain that bound Serenity to the floor. I should have realized it then. In my mind I imagined Nanny Jane as a middler who was asking too many caps and had to be taken care of.

Or a rival slaver. My mind tried to justify killing Nanny Jane, but in my heart it wasn't justifiable. When I took the job she was just a shop owner, whatever came out after my shot didn't matter. I shook my head. I would have done it again in a heart beat, if only the package was different.

“Caps.” I demanded, and dutifully he threw me a small bag. Catching it in my mouth I shook it lightly, not putting it into my bag before I heard that lovely jingle jangle sound. The price of freedom. The cost of a small pony's life. I should have asked for more. Nothing was worth this. Becoming a slave.

“Good?”

I nodded.

“We're done here.”

“Wait.” Idiot. I just had to open my big dumb mouth. I didn't even wait until the three had turned away like the cliché; I just blurted it out right away. Stupid. It made it sound like I cared. As if, somehow, this next question actually mattered. “So we're even. I'm free. The job's over, right?” Oh the laughter in his eyes made me want to tear one out and show it to the other.

“Huh? Oh yeah, of course. You done your job good, Gun. If you're ever in the area and needing work, I'm sure I can find something for ya.” Like attack a peaceful caravan? Drag screaming foals away from their mothers? Maybe whip a slave or two when I had the free time? Oh yeah, I'd be back.

That look in his eyes. The way he looked back to Serenity but quickly snapped his head back to me. Was he getting nervous? Suspicious? Was he afraid I was going to do something stupid? Really, he didn't know me at all. I did the job for him as Hired Gun, but even she would have balked at the job if it involved filly slaves, but she didn't know. Still, I'd agreed to the job, so I had to complete it. In the future I would ask for more details. I gave him my very best smile, but it didn't seem to reassure him.

“If I'm ever in the neighbourhood.” I stretched out for a second. “One more question.”

“Go on.” Impatient as always. Just like a stallion.

“What will you do with the filly?”

A brief moment panic washed over his face, “I... might sell her to The Moon. Some clientele will pay extra coin for a filly in their be-” d.

He never got to finish the sentence on account of the bullet that ripped into his head, turned his brain into mush, and exploded out the back. The voice in my head screamed, *Survive!*

But fuck it, some things are worth dying for.

As the brown corpse of Silver Bullet fell in an heap, I quickly grabbed the grenade I pilfered from Nanny Jane. "Run." I mouthed to the scared little filly before kicking it across the yard into one of the giant rocks flanking us.

BLAM. BOOM. BLAM.

The snipers fired simultaneously to the sound of my explosion. Fire lanced up my leg as one bullet pierced it. The second I heard bounce harmlessly away. The rock, it seemed, was perilously positioned and the explosion was enough to send it toppling over, the sniper along with it. I would have heard the crunch as the pony was crushed under what used to be his perch if not for the deafening smash the rock made upon landing.

My leg nearly gave out. I could feel the blood run down my leg staining my silver coat a rusted brown. I grit my teeth and kept moving. I didn't have time to feel pain. My eyes met that of the second sniper. I was a quicker shot though, and less than a quarter of a second after biting into my battle saddle I saw a red hole explode through his chest. The pony wobbled, unsure of what happened, and then fell from his perch, landing in a mangled heap. One left.

"Watch out!" Serenity called. Funny, I could have sworn I'd told her to run.

Instead of watching, I dropped my belly to the ground. It was the last thing 'Bloody Dagger' was expecting as she tripped over my body, landing with a deep thud my ringing ears could barely recognize. I got back up on all fours ignoring the pain raging in my leg. There before me was the body of 'Bloody', her knife spinning away from her.

"Don't move." My gun was pointed at her head. At this range it had turned Silver Bullet's face into soup, a fact I was sure she was aware of.

"Go on, bitch, pull the trigger." She spat. Pleasant, it also made what I was about to do that much stupider.

"No." Sighing I backed up, nearly bumping into Serenity who must have been as confused as 'Bloody' there. "You live."

"What? Are you a fucking retarded fucking cunt or something? Fuck, let me live, and I'll--"

"Nothing. Follow me with any force, and you die."

"What the fuck! You killed Bullet, you fuck-tard. Only thing what stopped them from tearing Spitshine apart, so if you fucking think--"

"I want you to take Spitshine and run. To one of the villages. Change your name, your Cutie-mark, whatever."

"You're fucking serious aren't you?" Her eyes narrowed at me, unsure of her own words. "What... what the fuck?"

"I have a soft spot for orphan fillies and broken things. Take your filly and leave. You keep playing raider..." I sighed. This was too much. Why couldn't she just take my offer? It was too generous already without her bitching about every little thing I said. I hate talking with raiders. "... I'll kill you." We matched glares for a second and then she nodded.

"Serenity, take her weapons." If she wasn't going to run she could at least make herself useful. Dutifully the little filly untied 'Bloody Dagger's' battle saddle. Motioning for Serenity to keep the battle saddle, it could bring in a pretty penny, she stuffed it into my saddle bags as I turned to 'bloody dagger'.

“Take your knife and go.”

My leg collapsed out from under me sending me face first into the dirt. “Fuuf.” I attempted to swear, spitting out dirt. Blood completely soaked my fore-leg and dyed it a rusted brown. In retrospect, I should have bound it up to stop the bleeding before hiking across an endless wasteland of dirt and rocks. Gritting my teeth, I tried to force myself to my feet.

Pain lanced up my leg into my chest.

I flopped back down. Resting it was. I groaned and poked the wound with my metal hoof. More pain lanced through me making me feel nauseous. “It looks infected...” Serenity stood beside my leg, inspecting it. When her head turned to regard me I couldn't help but notice her eyes no longer had that sad, morose look. Instead, she looked confused, maybe, or tentative. “Why didn'tcha bind it?” Why? Because, my dear, I'm an idiot.

“Had better things to do.” Like saving your life.

“Whaaat? Ya can't be serious! A bullet wound is dangerous... Do you know what an infected wound could do!?” For a little thing, she sure was talkative now. I looked to my metal leg and smiled at her. I was pretty sure I knew the effects of infected wounds, though I doubted this one was nearly as serious. She bent over my leg frowning at the bloody wounds. “So close to the subclavian artery, not good. Gunna have'ta remove the bullet.” She was ranting and walking around me like she had just ate a whole bowl of sugar.

“Why?”

“Most of the time a bullet ain't dangerous; more dangerous to take'em out, what with the poking around ya gotta do. But from that shot, it could wander and puncture an important artery! Could bleed out inside!”

What? “You know this... how?”

“Humph.” She stopped raises a hoof dramatically to her chest, “I was an apprentice medic with the Watchers before... before...” The word chocked in her throat, but she shook it off. “There were other fillies and colts when I was taken. Some were wounded, but I helped them... and then...” her tiny face scrunched up and she kicked at the ground with both hooves.

Groaning, I eased myself to my feet. Pain shot through my body, but I kept to my feet. “In my bag. Pills. Hand me one.” My shoulder burned as Serenity levitated a single small blue pill out. It was chalky and hard to swallow, but as soon as I managed it, the pain in my leg faded to a dull... dullness. Med-X in pill form. It came in injections too, but either way it was insanely useful. It was a shame I could only pilfer a few from Nanny Jane.

“The stable,” I remembered suddenly. We had been walking back the way we had come. I had planned to skip around Bridle Hope on the small dirt road my pipbuck showed that led to the main highway on the other side of a huge mountain that rose in between Bridle Hope and Dise. From there I had hoped to find somepony to take in Serenity, but with my new information I would drop her off with The Watchers in Dise when I went to see them. Doctor Morowynd said he was to take me to see them, so I figured I would go myself and see if there were any caps in it for me. First things first though.

We reached the wooden door in the cliffside just as Celestia's tears began to fall anew. With a single kick of my metal leg the rotten wood turned to splinters. A few more kicks and it was nothing more than a hole. “It wasn't locked.” Serenity said, a sly smile on her face. Rolling my eyes, I continued into the cave. It was dark, almost too dark. I found my metal leg tripping over rocks, nearly sending me

sprawling more than once.

The painkillers ran out as we reached the huge cog-like door of the stable. From the looks of it the door had long since been rolled away to the point it looked rusted to the metal floor of the stable. Groaning, I nearly collapsed but held strong. There on the floor in front of the small stairs that led to the stable proper, and beside the door control device I saw a rusted brown blood stain. In my mind it was Wildfire's, the two stables so similar.

“This way.” I limped up the stairs. Three doors, I had been here before. I took the centre one as the lights overhead flickered and waned. Honestly, I was surprised there was power at all, or at least I would have been, if I had been able to think about anything but my leg. Getting shot sucked. It wasn't the first time I got shot, but it was the first time I had taken a high calibre round to bare skin. The wound stank, or maybe that was the Stable.

I froze at the intersection where I once bucked a pony to death.

“Are you okay... ?” A small voice asked. Great, now she was worrying about me. I grunted and kept on, rounding the corner. All the stables were the same, somepony told me once, so I knew where to find the clinic. I walked past the spot where I once stabbed a pony in the head with the hot barrel of my gun.

I shuddered. The whole place just seemed so quiet. The last stable had ponies running, and screaming, and... there was something else I couldn't put my finger on. In this stable, the only sounds was my hushed breath and the whirling of the lights overhead. Creepy.

“Here,” I groaned, pointing to the medic door. Thankfully, it was the same as stable 42, so maybe my adventure there wasn't a complete waste disaster. Of course, if I had never gone to stable 42, I would never be here in stable... stable... “Did you see what stable this is?”

“Stable 123, the door said...” Stable 123. I pushed on the door to the clinic, and it slid open with a reliable whoosh. The white room on the other side looked half a mess. Waste baskets were knocked over, spilling used syringes across the floor, and the huge medical cabinet was lying on its back, completely empty. Of the two examination tables, one was broken in half, but the other was standing upright and only slightly stained. So much for a sterile environment. Everything had been looted multiple times by the looks, well except for a yellow and pink box hanging off the side of a white wall.

I limped to the box poking it. Locked. Great. “I could pick the lock,” Serenity said standing on her hind legs to reach it, “If I had a bobb-”

SMASH

I placed my metallic hoof back on the ground as the medical box creaked and opened. “Or not...” Serenity was rolling her eyes at me, but I didn't care. Mission accomplished. Lets see. Two healing potions, a rad-x, a bottle of purified water, and some tweezers. Serenity gathered the supplies with magic, sending that stupid burning sensation through my shoulder again. I was never going to get used to that.

“Okay! Lets get started!” She seemed a bit too excited for open surgery. She picked up a stool from the ground and placed it by the examination table, motioning for me to get on. The whole thing creaked under my considerable weight but held firm. Stretching out the offending leg, she peered over it, a grin on her face. “This may sting.”

With a wisp of magic, she poured the water directly into my open wound and got to cleaning it with a rag she apparently kept with her. Gritting my teeth against the pain I nodded at her. She licked her lips in anticipation as she floated the tweezers above my open wounds. I took a deep breath.

It took a few seconds after the tweezers went in for the pain to register. It was nearly blinding. I bit my

lip to hold back the pain and very nearly bit right through. The magically powered tweezers dug into my open wound, digging and clawing until she eventually pulled them out holding a bullet shell with an mushroomed tip. "Hollow point." I said through my teeth. No wonder the wound hurt so much; the bastard hit me with a .308 calibre hollow point round. It was a miracle I didn't bleed out.

"Hollow what?" She was a smart little filly, so I was a bit surprised at that she didn't know that.

"Its a type of bullet. Expands going in... for massive damage." The little filly seemed to be contemplating that as her grey eyes assessed the damage to my leg above my pipbuck. Cleaning the wound a bit more, she looked around.

"Need bandages. Even with the healing potions it should be bandaged up as well, ya know? Healin' potions are good my master always said, but healin' spells plus some good'ol TLC is even better. Besides I've heard stories of them what think they can drink a couple dozen healing potions and be fine, but later die of lead poisoning cause they didn't treat them wounds good 'nough. Healin' potions aren't magic... well okay they ARE magic, but magic can't solve all your problems." Says the unicorn to the earth pony.

The static from my pipbuck boomed as Serenity bounded up my leg with bandages I still had from stable 42. The DJ's voice played over the radio, and was as handsome as ever, but lost something with the interference being in the middle of a mountain caused. "*This is... Paradise... In the west causing trouble for the NCA... canyon ridge bridge under... NCA say they will stop at nothing...*" I growled at the thing and turned the radio off. There was no point if I could barely understand what he was saying.

Finally finished with the bandages, Serenity jumped down off her stool and looked up at me. "There. Now get some rest, you look awful." I must have. My mane stuck to my forehead with sweat, I felt too light and too heavy at the same time. It had been a long couple days, and that nap earlier really hadn't been all that satisfying.

"Can't. Gotta move."

"No buts, you're sick."

"Can't leave you here alone."

"What! Don't be silly, silly. You've done waaaay more than enough, more than I could have hoped for, so it's my turn. You rest, okay? I can't just let you walk around all sick and injured." I had done as little as equinely possible, but I was much too fatigued to say so, so I nodded dumbly.

"Fine... just don't wander off." I closed my eyes, and almost immediately went to sleep.

"T'ain't nothin' 'ere, ah tells ya. T'ain't nothin'." My eyes filtered open, the sound of voices drowning out the gentle humming of the lights. "Told'ya they wouldn't be, an 'ere we's are neck deep in raider territory, an' ya tellin' me ta look harder." I didn't recognize the accent or the buck what spoke with it. Groaning, I rolled to my side towards the sounds.

"Keep looking. We go back empty handed, and we won't have enough to eat," the second voice said. Another Stallion, but more refined. Probably grew up in the city.

"Ah told'ya t'ain't nothin' here. Ya think youse the first what thought ta look dis stable?"

"I thought maybe we'd find something the others picked over--"

"Youse got us trapped in Raider country an--"

"Both of you, shut up!" A mare snapped, her voice a shrill whip. "Well, what do we have here, a filly?"

Serenity! Jumping off the bed, I suddenly remembered where I was. “Hey, where you going?” I heard metallic hoof-steps outside my door as Serenity turned and ran, but only half a second as the sound suddenly vanished. “Well, follow her! Sell the filly, and this trip's actually worth something.”

“I t'aint no slaver.”

The door slid open. “No. You're not.” I glowered down at them, standing up straight to show my true height. The mare was a tiny little thing with a comically oversize rifle strapped to her back. She reminded me of Lye, except she was an earth pony with a tear-drop cutie mark.

“What? Who're ya? An' what ya think'a doin'?” The colloquial stallion spoke. His coat and mane were both a deep black, with a desperado hat of similar colouring atop his head. Covering what must have been a horn as my shoulder burned and the shotgun on his back started to glow ever so slightly.

“You're an idiot, filly.” The third spoke. I could barely see his coat with the heavy armoured barding and large helmet he wore, but in between the cracks I thought I saw stripes. “Three against one, you're unarmed and...” his head turned to my bandaged leg, “Injured.”

I stretched back, tensing my muscles, growling a bit. “Don't have to,” I spoke to the mare with the tear drop cutie mark, “I can kill one. Thing is,” I grunted as pain from my leg lanced through my body. It wasn't as bad as before, not nearly. “Y'all don't know which one.” I had seen these types before working at Marefort. Scavengers and traders who had no love for each other, but stuck together out of protection. They'd kill for each other, but not die.

The pure black stallion was the first to back off. Dipping his desperado hat over his eyes, and easing the magic on his shotgun he stepped back. “T'ain't no way ah'm dyin' for this. T'ain't no slaver, never have been and I ain't dyin' ta start.”

“Coward,” The armoured stallion said stepping up, “She's just trying to scare you, no way she could kill a one of us. She doesn't have a single fucking weapon on her.”

“True.” The black unicorn replied, “But I seen them augmented freaks 'fore. One stomped my ma's head to mush in one try.” I stomped a pony's head to mush before I ever got my metal leg, but I kept that to myself. “Might be that fancy armour keep ya safe... might be it won't. She look big 'nough ta bend steel.” Snap chains anyway.

The mare tried a different method. “How much for the filly?” she whinnied.

“Your head.” I said flatly.

“Nothing then.” The tear drop mare looked at me, and then to her two comrades. “We could kill you and take her.”

“I ain't doin' nothin like that.” The black unicorn interjected.

“You could try.” I answered the mare, who was obviously the leader.

“It's not worth it.” The armoured stallion said finally. “Fillies don't bring as much as colts. Even if we kill this one, no way she goes down without a fight. No matter what we'll be at a loss.” Sure you could just tell yourself that.

“Good. Leave my stable.” The tear drop mare looked ready to argue, but she turned at the stomp of my metal hoof. The huge metal one with stripes under his armour stopped to glare, before vanishing around a corner. Three ponies scared away at only the threat of violence, though laziness may have played a part. I stared down the hall they left for a good minute before remembering.

Serenity. “Fuck.”

I didn't bother running the way I assume she went. Instead I strolled casually down the hallway, limping all the way. If I remembered correctly this hallway led down stairs and into the Atrium. From there I could pretty much get anywhere in the Stable. By themselves these massive structures were just metal and concrete and not entirely dangerous. My real concern was her getting stuck somewhere.

As I started down the steps, I couldn't help sense something wrong. Maybe it was the smell of stale air, or the annoying humming of the lights, but it just felt... unnatural. These Stables were built to save ponies lives, but it seemed to me not their spirits. Even when compared to my brown wasteland, these tombs seemed ready made to suck the soul out of any pony what entered. How could ponies live in a place so gray?

"Serenity!" I called, sounding unnaturally loud as I got to the bottom of the metal steps and into the concrete hallway. Above me hung a dark yellow sign -- 'Atrium'. Deja Vu again. If I could burn down every stable, I would. Goddess how I hated these places. Instead of heading down the same path I took in stable 42, I veered off to a side room.

The small room looked very much like what I would expect of an office. What a stable needed with an office for I really couldn't say. A tall cabinet had been thrown to the ground, spilling its contents across the ground (An ample supply of wonder glue and blank paper, but nothing really of worth). I hopped over it and made my way to the single desk, with a terminal still glowing.

I poked at the thing with my hoof. I may have jumped back when the damn thing beeped at me. Leaning closer once again, I prepared my fragile heart for beeping. In my defence, I had never seen a working terminal, much less used one. The controls were finicky and undoubtedly made for a Unicorn's magic, but I did manage to scroll through a list of journal entries. Three of the four were marked in red, so for once in my life, my curiosity got the better of me and I opened them in order.

---Journal Entry Day 360---

Doc says I should use this terminal to write down my feelings and stuff. Says I'm too mopey and should find myself a mare and start a family. Why? I mean, we been here a year, and it looks like we'll for much longer. The hall lights hurt my head, and everything smells. Our government never should have aligned with those Equestrian fools. They provoked the lion, but we're the ponies what get mauled. Isn't fair. They're the ponies what died, but... Stable-Tec promised that these stable's would save us. They didn't though. No. Equestria Killed us, Stable-Tec built our coffin.

I'm never leaving.

Not sure I would if they offered. I hate this place. I hate the lights, and the floor, and everything. I hate the way the basement leaks when it rains and fills the whole place with the slightest scent of radiation. But I wouldn't leave. I saw the outside world and what it offered. Ponies should stay down here, and just live out their lives. Our race should end for what we did. What those Equestrians made us do.

Nah, we're still procreating. The first foal of the new world was born today. Cute little thing. Born to live and die all in darkness, with the ever-present consequences of their mothers' and fathers' failures pressing down on them. With the memory of war and death the only thing they'll ever know. Does that sound fair?

Whatever. Doc doesn't know shit. I'm not moping. Just telling it like it is. World is burnt; our race is buried. We killed the world, and now live in it... does that sound fair?

Well that sounded... bad. I clicked to the next marked entry.

---Journal Entry Day 10925---

Nearly thirty years and I still haven't figured out how to change the Automatic Journal Names. I'm too old for this.

Something big is going to happen soon. I can feel it in my bones. Outside the rains have been going on non-stop for weeks now, and the Over-stallion is worried. Can't say I blame him none. Most of us here remember the war, and most saw the green flames wash over Celestia's Paradise as we ran. From miles away it was impossible to miss. We saw the world end and now... This talk, I hear it. The kids want to go outside. See the world. But they don't understand. The world is dead. We killed it. The Over-stallion understands this... but public pressure will break him like it broke her.

I'm too old for this. Got nothing much to say but to fill this damn thing with the regrets of an old pony. An old pony who saw the world burn, and now my grandsons and granddaughters plan to prop up it's corpse on strings and make it dance. Seem fair?

The final entry was not dated, and consisted of a single word.

Goodbye.

Struck by the words, I turned suddenly to the wall behind me, staring at the splattered rusted grey stain on the wall.

I stepped back. My chest felt tight, and I quickly let out the breath I was holding. It wasn't elegant writing, nothing amazing but it was... real. I know the world ended, but to read the words from a pony who saw it happened, and then he ended himself. Shaking my head I cleared it. History was not helping me find Serenity, or survive. Mysteries were nice, but for later.

I walked out of the room, and back to the hallway. "Serenity!" I called out, my voice dancing through the hallway into the Atrium and echoing back to me. Did all the Stables echo so much? Making my way to the atrium, I found my cell in the same place again. The room was the same as it was in stable 42. A large lower area, though this one looked mussy and strewn with litter and tipped over tables, and an upper balcony which connected to various rooms. All in standard Stable colours, rusted grey, grey, and gray.

Across the gap was the round window leading to the Overma-Stallion's office. If I squinted my eyes I could almost see the mark where my spear struck it before bouncing away. Really? That was not the time for flash backs, I had a filly to find. Shaking the memory out of my head I tried to remember how in the wasteland a pony got into the office. I had run out of one once, and found my way to the surface, but didn't know how to get there.

Honestly it didn't take me that long. A short limping hike through dark, dingy, and, as the journal had promised, smelly hallways I found the door clearly marked "Overmare's office." Strange, I was under the impression it was an Over-stallion. No matter! If the lights were still on and humming, then likely all the surveillance cameras were too, and I remembered the wall of monitors from that time I kicked Smooth Tongue out a window. Reaching up I turned the handle.

Locked. Good. That most likely meant nopony had bothered to loot the damn thing. A locked door was not that much of a problem for me, however.

SMASH.

Opening doors with a buck. It was a wonder nopony else ever thought of it, or maybe they'd tried and

failed. Few ponies were as large as I, and even fewer were as strong. With my super strength and robotic parts I wondered if I technically qualified as a super hero. Minus the hero. Whatever. Once again, my intelligence chip had brought my mind to new and disturbing places with its 'imagination'.

The room was so similar to the one in 42 it was almost depressing. Though it was notably cleaner and missing the chain that had once bound me to the floor. Everything else, from the wall of monitors to the round desk with a single terminal, was eerily similar. Of course everything about this place was, so it shouldn't really have come as a surprise. The wall of monitors was off, but there had to be a way to fix that.

I made my way around the desk. Good, the terminal was still working. With a few clicks I got it... and as my pipbuck downloaded files without my consent it started to play something. *"Hello! My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me (since I am pretty famous) for my awesome performances at events like last year's GALLoPS, or maybe just as the founder of Red Racer... Actually you might not. Never did get a foothold into Caledonia..."*

"It doesn't matter right now. You're the... lucky mare to find herself as the Overmare of Stable 123, and I can't say I envy you. You see we here at Stable-tec have... a philosophy. The worlds turning to shit... I know. But we have to find a way to make it... better. And... fuck... you won't like what comes next."

"You can't stay here. You need to leave. I am asking this of you... when the radiation goes down to liveable levels, leave. Go out and make the world a better place, fix this fucking mess we caused. You aren't Equestrians; you shouldn't get it bad... hopefully... hopefully you can leave in a year. Two. Every Stable was made with an idea in mind...find a way to fix the mistakes. When the other stables come out of hiding... I want there to be a world for them to live in."

"Yeah...I chose a non-Equestrian stable for this reason. Only six stables were made outside of Equestria, and this task I made sure was in one of them. We fucked this world up. We can't fix it. Not yet. Not until we're ready, and maybe not even then. So when the times comes I am asking you... leave and rebuild the world."

"If you don't want to, then I'm sorry to say I'm not giving you a choice."

"You may have already noticed the basement leaks. It will flood. You may have noticed the smell. The air filter will break down. You may be able to live for ten, twenty years. But eventually you'll have to leave, or everypony will die. Yeah... I'm a fucking monster. But somepony needs to fix up this mess we caused, and fuck it I'll make sure they do it whether they want to or not."

"Download the coordinates and passwords on the terminal. They'll lead you to help, a start. We have a second chance."

"If it's any consolation, I'm sorry. I never wanted this... get out there and start rebuilding. Soon everypony else will join you. We'll have learned. I'll make them learn. So this will never happen again. May Celestia bless us all."

The voice faded from the terminal and began to repeat. Well that was certainly... interesting. This Scootaloo pony seemed like a right asshole, but she had a... a good idea? I'm not sure. Whatever it was she thought she was doing, she clearly cared enough about it to chance hundreds of ponies lives on it. It didn't matter. Whoever she was, she was dead. And whatever she wanted didn't happen. The past was over, and she lost.

Flicking through the terminal with some difficulty, I eventually found the 'Security Cam Control Switch' which had been switched to 'off'. With the press of a hoof the whole wall behind me powered up.

Grinning like an idiot to myself, I scanned the screens. Almost a quarter of the screens showed nothing but a murky wet haze. I guess Scootaloo hadn't been kidding when she said the whole place was going to flood. It didn't take long for me to find a little ball of pink amidst the grey-greyness. The Camera seemed to suggest it was on a lower level, and the room looked deteriorated, but she looked fine. Curious though. I saw her inch out into the centre of the dilapidated room.

The floor cracked. Serenity fell into the murky waters. Trapped.

Fuck.

How did the doctor say to take this damn thing off? Push this button, wait, think about ice cream. Argh, it needed a switch or a button or something. There. With a hiss and a snap, my metal leg clanged to the ground. Taking a step I nearly fell over. Well that's awkward. Looking at my shoulder there was still a sheet of metal and electronics attached where the leg proper could be attached. I hoped it was water proof, but it was worth the risk.

It was a half mad scramble to the lower levels. I quite literally bucked out the window of the Overstallion's office and jumped to the lower Atrium instead of wasting the time and walking the whole damn way around. Luckily, one of the files my pipbuck had downloaded was a Stable Map, allowing me to descend into the dank and mouldy halls without getting lost.

Looking down, I could see the frighteningly dirty water where Serenity had fallen. She was nowhere to be seen though, and if my Pipbuck was right, the level below was just as large as everywhere else. Who knew where the current could have taken her. I steeled myself, taking one last gulp of air, then dropped into the cold water.

I fell below the waves water, flooding my eyes. It was physically painful to wrench them open to look through the murky waves. On my wrist my pipbuck made its click-clicking sound, which I knew couldn't be good. Especially not with all the radiation the water must have had soaked in. I kicked my legs and sucked in air as soon as my muzzle broke the surface. My invisible leg stung, but it wasn't shocking me, so that was good. Diving back under the water, I spotted the nearby doorway.

Only problem was, on the other side the water flowed to the ceiling. When I tried and failed to surface, I panicked. Lashing out, everything became lost in a murky haze. My heart pounded and my face somehow ended up pressed against the floor. My eyes strained to make heads or tails of the water. My entire world became the murky haze around me and nothing else. For a second, even Serenity was forgotten as I struggled with the water. Everything looked green, and I could barely see, but I would be damned if I was going to drown. Shaking my head, I got a sense of the world around me.

Dragging my way across the bottom of the sunken tunnel I ignored the rising urge to... breathe. Looking up I could see... a light. Something. I swam for it. The pressure in my chest burned. Fuck. I need breath. Air. Please be there. My head slammed against the light. No air. I tried to inhale, but water flooded my throat. Burning. Dying. I needed to breathe.

Mercifully, I found a small kink in the ceiling. I surfaced, coughing out water, which burned as much coming out as it did going in. I was here to save Serenity, but how? My pipbuck kept ticking and I hadn't any idea of what to do, and I had breathed enough water that I felt like a fish. Fuck. This was going bad. Looking down, I could see my bandaged foreleg unravel spilling blood into the water. In case it needed to get dirtier. Shivering, I took a deep breath and lowered myself back into the drink.

Flooded indeed. No wonder the ponies that lived here left.

I squirmed through the murky wastes and felt... something. A vibration. In the water. I searched around wildly. For a second, something yellow flashed in front of me, in the murky water. It vanished. Wait, it was here, Serenity. Kicking with all the might my three legs could muster, her form slowly came into view. The vibrating was shaking my whole body, but it was fading.

Those sad grey eyes looked at me as I realized her tail was tangled in a fallen chair, holding her down. Her legs were kicking furiously and her horn glowed, but when those eyes fell on me, she stopped, and smiled. I wanted to scream at her to keep fighting, but she had lost. Who knew how long she had been down here, lost and afraid. Her mouth opened involuntarily.

No! Not again!

My fore leg wrapped around her body, and my legs kicked dragging her with me, the chair trailing behind. My shoulder burned, my leg throbbed, and my chest shrieked out in pain from the water I'd breathed. Faintly, I could still hear my pipbuck clicking angrily. I pushed all that away. Pain faded as I saw Serenity, the life fading from her. This was no time to feel pain. Now if only I could find the exit.

I lashed around, looking. My pipbuck clicked and I glared at it... just long enough to see the map. Yes! I was a genius.

As my chest cried out for air, I pushed towards the direction it told.

I had managed to find the stairs. I dragged her up with my mouth, limping along on three legs. Dropping her, I leaned down pressing my mouth to hers. Wildfire had made me practice mouth to mouth resuscitation once. Stopping I put my hoof to her chest and pushed. Nothing. I breathed into her mouth again, tasting metal. Not a good sign. My hoof pressed against her chest, "Breathe." I grunted. "Breathe, dammit."

She coughed up water, and breathed.

I collapsed beside her as my pipbuck flashed a warning. It was then that I remembered I didn't know how to swim.

"You... saved me..." I heard Serenity say. We didn't fall asleep there, or rather I didn't, but I did lie there a while, taking stock of my wounds. I hadn't even fought anything this time, and it hurt worse than when the raider attacked my caravan. Groaning, I rolled to face her.

"Yeah?" My throat burned just talking. Who knew water could be so painful?

"Why?"

"Couldn't let you drown." I coughed a bit. I painfully moved my pipbuck in front of my eyes. Huh. According to this I had 'minor rad poisoning'. I'd seen ponies die of rad poisoning back in Marefort. All of their hair fell out, and they lived in pain, vomiting profusely, and shitting blood before dying. Not a good way to go.

"No..." her voice sounded weak. "Before... you were... gunna sell me. Then you saved me.... No pony ever saved me. Why?" Well that was a stupid question.

"I did sell you." For 800 caps, a new gun, and my freedom. A good deal I thought once. "Then, after the deal was done... I killed him."

"So... you didn't kill him till your deal was done?" Of course not. I made an agreement, and I wasn't about to back out like that. It wasn't the way I ran things. "But still, why did'ya kill 'em? You plannin' to

sell me?”

“No. Because he was an ass.” Urgh. I rolled onto my feet, well most of them. “Need to find my leg.” And I hobbled off. Walking with three legs, I should mention, is insanely difficult. I had to rear up and stretch forward, then scoot my back legs up. All while Serenity, sick as she was, managed to giggle at me. Lucky for me, the room Serenity fell from wasn't far away.

I lifted up my dead metal leg in my mouth, impressed with the weight. When it was moving me around it hadn't seemed quite so heavy. Not caring, I quickly slammed the connector into it's port on my arm. And screeched. My whole body convulsed and I dropped to the ground as the nerve endings forcibly connected, crying foul. It had only lasted half a second, but it felt like minutes of my whole body being dropped in boiling water.

Gasping as the connection finished, I could feel my leg move. Why the fuck didn't the doctor warn me about that?

“Are you okay?” Serenity said by the doorway. Grunting and nodding, I hoisted myself to my feet.

“Never felt better.” Nothing like a near death experience to wake you up in the morning. Afternoon. Whatever. Bending over, I grabbed my saddle bag from where I left it, and tossed it over my back. “Get some radaways from my pack.” My shoulder burned with renewed fury as the pink filly took out our medicine. It tasted bitter and made me gag, but it was better than being, you know, poisoned.

We eventually dragged our bodies back up to the infirmary, neither really talking much. Nothing else to say, I guess. When I looked at her eyes, she didn't look sad anymore; instead her grey eyes seemed very nearly happy. Or at least the closest approximation she could get while still keeping that 'sad orphan filly' vibe.

“Wha's your name.”

“Hired Gun.” I was sure she already knew, but didn't bother protesting. It was much more profitable to collapse to the ground on my bedroll.

“Your real name.”

“Argh.” I smacked my head against the floor. “it IS my real name.”

“Liar.” She giggled lying beside me, her head resting on me. Great, now she was all cuddly. Why can't kids be consistent?

“Where I come from ponies get two names, one when they're born, and another they can choose after they get their cutie mark.” Wildfire was born 'Cakewalk' and changed it as soon as equinely possible, and I always knew my brother as Meadow, but Smooth called him 'Summer Silk'. What a stupid name.

“Oh... Can I change my name when I get my cutie-mark?” She grinned up at me. I have no idea why she was asking my permission; I had just saved her life, twice, but it didn't make me her mother.

So I didn't answer. Instead, I poked at my pipbuck, thanking Luna these things were water proof, until one of the audio files I had managed to download started to play. As it started to play I realized that maybe I should have waited until Serenity wasn't around.

BANG BANG BANG

“Oh Goddess. They're coming. Fuck. Gotta keep a record. They won't. Fuckers won't know how to delete this. When Stable-Tec comes I want them to know... want them to know I tried. Fuck I did. But... they're afraid. It's been what, eighteen years? Everypony remembers. How could they forget? They saw the world burn, but they don't get it. The leaks are getting worse, and... and ponies are going to get sick

soon.

The world outside... it's dead, but not dying. The geiger counters say we can live outside but... they're afraid."

BANG

"Shit. Not much time. They're going to kill me. Fuck, I lived too long. But we need to get out of this place before it kills us. They won't listen. They're afraid. Scared enough to kill. Why the fuck did Stable-Tec give us so many Celestia-damn guns. Doors breaking, yeah, I'm one dead mare, and they know it. Fuck, I lived too long. I'm trying to save them, and they're too blind.

SMASH

"Shit!"

The recording ended with a crash, and howling wail. I'm not sure what was worse, the fact she was killed for being right, or the fact that those that killed her would create the hell-hole known as the Dise wasteland.

Footnote!

Level Up!

New perk! Intense Training: Level Up Perception by 1.

Skill Note: Speech 25

(A/N: Thanks to Kkat for being awesome and writing such an amazing story, and theBSDude for putting up with my shit writing and making it better.)

Chapter 4: Chekhov Stole My Gun

“If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.”

“Hey again Dise, it's me, Mr New Haygas, which means it's time for the news: it seems the Steel Rangers patrolling around the Snake and Old Rush rivers have accused me, Mr New Haygas, of being a shill for NCA bits, an accusation as foalish as it is incorrect. Dise only accepts caps, and there's no place I'd rather be than here.” He chuckled into the microphone, *“When the NCA comes up, I report it as I would anypony, and Celestia knows they have enough to report about. Well, that's how it goes in the wasteland. Here's a new song from a local entertainer known as 'The Traveller'; don't ask about the name, I couldn't tell you. .”*

*“Oh, give me a home where the Minotaur roam.
Where the mole rat and the bloat sprite play.
Where seldom is heard an encouraging word,
And my coat is not glowing all day.*

“Home, home on the wastes,” Well this song got repetitive. I lowered my head let out a sigh and kept walking. It had been a long trip since Stable 123; we lucked upon a small trading group called 'The Gun Farmers' who, uh, traded guns. Go figure. They were a bit suspicious of us, and I of them, but Serenity knew the land little, and I not at all so we needed a guide. Luckily enough, they lost a few bucks on their trip and needed another gun in case of raiders. Unfortunately, I still had to pay way for Serenity and even then they did not like the idea of dragging a filly around. Not that they spoke much to me about it. Apparently, I was scary.

*“Where the rads ain't too high, and The Watcher's aren't bad
The Hydras are playful and mild
Oh, I would not exchange this home on the wastes
for the only big city so wild”*

Something told me the song was being just a bit sarcastic in its assessment. For the most part, the travel had been slow going, moving at a ludicrously slow brahmin speed around a huge jut of a mountain that rose like a pimple on the face of the wasteland. Hills the wasteland had in spades, but this was the only mountain in miles. It also took a bloody long time to get around.

*“Home, home on the wastes.
Where the Goddess' great armies still play
Where seldom is heard an encouraging word,
And my rads just keep rising all day.”*

“You mind turning that off?” The buck in front of me asked. He was a pale purple stallion with a green and blue mane, hiding under a rather fancy looking hat, and a stub of a tail that did little but accentuate his rather fine looking flank. What? Don't judge me. There's nothing wrong with sampling the merchandise.

“No.”

“Please...” Fine ass, but no backbone. A poor combination. Also prone to headaches and whining from what I've seen. He was apparently a pro at fixing things, so at least he had that going for him. Still

annoying as hell to walk guard duty with.

I cleared my throat.

“No.”

“Home, Home on the wastes.

Where the mole rat and the bloat sprite play.

Where seldom is heard an encouraging word,

And my coat just keeps glowing all day.”

“See it’s over. Was that so bad?” He grumbled and nodded as my radio continued to blare. As we walked my leg began to sting but a little. It had healed well after the incident at Stable 123. Serenity had been doing better as well; the murky water and whole almost dying thing left her with a bad fever. The first few days she was barely conscious, but it had broken the night before: she was still ill, but at least she was awake.

“You shouldn't tease, Grimy,” She mumbled on my back, using her pet name for Grimer (if you haven't figured it out, that would be the whiny unicorn I was bothering with music). Shrugging my shoulders, I shook her just enough to make her think she was falling and sending her into a giggling fit. “S-stoooooop. I'm bein' serious.” I stopped in my tracks just long enough to turn off my radio. The songs were getting repetitive anyway.

“Thanks.” Grimer turned his head offering me a dull smile, before trotting back along his head low.

If I told you this shell of a pony was the 'leader' of these 'Gun Farmers', please don't laugh too hard. To hear his trading partners talk, he looked weak but knew guns better than anypony else alive; after he managed to fix up my .308 calibre sniper with parts from my old .357 repeater I simply had to agree. Even still, of the ponies I'd met so far in the wasteland Nanny Jane would have sold him manure for a love potion, Pearly would have kicked his head the other way around, and Silver Bullet wouldn't have wasted the bullets killing him. That being said, he was alive and that was more than two of my examples could say: so, he must have been doing something right.

As we corned the last part of the rocky mountain base, I looked upwards. The very tip of the mountain struck through the cloud layer leaving a small patch of clear blue sky encircling the mountains tip. Luna Hornfuck me, I don't think I've ever seen the sky before. Just looking up with the the huge mountain framing the endless void... woah. Yeah, that's one way to make yourself dizzy. Shaking my head I tore my sight away from the abyss.

“Yeah.” Grimer smacked his lips, “Threw up the first time I saw it.” I'm sure he did. “Over there, called Timber.” He pointed with his head. Following his movements, I saw a small village on the south side of the mountain that looked, and I could have been wrong, recently built.

“Impressi-”

A gravely voiced roared, “Stop Where You Are!” That's okay, I really had nothing to say anyway. I backed up quickly, and bent down on my haunches to let Serenity off, before turning my battle saddle at the voice. Scratch that. Voices. The horn fucking thing was really just an expression, it wasn't meant to be taken literally. Metaphor appeared not to be the wasteland's strong point.

Adrenaline pumped through me as a squad of NCA ponies marched up to our little group. Only five though, and they didn't even attempt stealth, walking straight down the road at us. The safety of my rifle clicked off, and the scope snapped up over my eye. I hunched down as the rest of our gang scrambled for guns and ammo. They stopped just meters in front of us, the only sound the cocking of the guns on all sides. Serenity whimpered and hid behind the only cart. The tension was thick enough

to cut with a knife.

“We surrender.”

What!? My head wrenched away from my battle-saddle towards Grimer. He was cowering and bowing, that coward. I gritted my teeth and turned back to the NCA.

“Take their weapons, and confiscate their goods until we can verify they aren't selling to raiders.” I glowered at the Stallion with the star shaped badges. Until he took off his helmet magically. His skin... was not. It looked almost as if he had been flayed and only grew it back half-way leaving it patched grey and red, with wisps of mane sticking ostensibly to his head around his rough horn. When he cracked his neck his molted skins broke and opened, but didn't bleed.

The rage subsided into shock. I'd never seen a ghoul before.

The NCA troopers relived us of our weapons and supplies before marching us down through the one pony town. To my surprise, the town was completely new, or at least not two hundred years old like everything else. Houses and buildings lined the streets made of wood, not reconfigured trains carts or the like. None were painted, but just looking at them was impressive. A full town made in the wasteland from material that wasn't scavenged. Compared to Bridle Hope or Marefort, the place was a pristine centre of wastelander ingenuity. Well, except for the ramshackle tents on the far end of town. Outside the tents, they had planted a flag showing the silhouette of a five-legged pony on a blue background.

We stopped at a large three-story building and were pushed through under strict orders not to leave town and not to cause any trouble. The bar we were pushed into was large, but the way the walls seemed to slope inward made it feel cramped. It still was cleaner than Marefort. Smelled better too; like sweat and fire instead of shit and oil.

The sweet (and talkative) bartender took pity on our plight and gave us a room for free until a paying customer needed it. The 'room' consisted of a single bed on the ground, and a small dresser.

Shaking Serenity on my back she didn't respond. I bent my neck around and couldn't help but smile at the small pink pony sleeping in a ball on my back. Lifting her up as gentle as I could by the scruff of her neck, I laid her gently on the small bed. For a second, from the way her leg twitched as I set her down, I thought I'd woken her up. But she just curled back into a ball, snoring softly.

Don't get any ideas, I didn't care for fillies and planned on getting rid of her as soon as possible. Seriously. Turning from the room, I quickly trotted downstairs. I needed a drink.

“Rather die than live like that.” I growled as I finally sat down at the bar beside Grimer. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the image of that corpse-pony out of my head. Even when they took my rifle away, I didn't protest, my mind too fixated by the ghoul. I'd heard of them sure enough, but to see one up close was a completely different thing. Sometimes things are so disgusting you just can't look away.

“Ain't so bad,” Grimer said, letting an empty shot glass drop from his mouth onto the bar. “Hear tell they live forever.”

Forever as a corpse. Was that cosmic irony? I sighed, motioning for the bar tender to pour me a glass. I could really go for some whiskey... and from the looks of it I wasn't the only one. The large ground floor was filled with down-on-their-luck ponies. They were drinking in silence, with the wooden walls of the bar leaning in on them as if they held the weight of the world.

“It'd be bad,” I insisted, as my drink finally slid down the bar towards me.

“The NCA has more Ghouls than you can spit at.” I imagined ghouls got spit on a lot. “Eye Glow, the largest of the City-States that makes up the NCA is made almost entirely of ghouls. Come from Stable 102.” I raised my eyebrow as the whiskey snaked down my throat and burned into my chest. “Heard the recordings myself. Stable-Tec made the vault wrong on purpose to test the effects of extended magical radiation.” He grinned with his rotten teeth, “Guess they found out.”

“You know this how?”

“Been there once,” He scratched at the hard bar with his hoof, “More then once. Fought in the Red War too.” Never heard of anything like that. Though I couldn't say I was surprised. War never changes. “It's a nice place, not so nice as Dise, but what is?”

“You've been around.”

“Here and there.” He admitted, dropping off his stool onto all fours stomping the dirt floor to stretch his legs. “Travelled from Manehatten to Flankyard, Roam to Dise.” I was... surprised. He didn't seem the adventurous type, or the type to be able to survive. If he went to Manehatten, that meant he must have travelled through the northern passes, and the Crimson Hoof by all rights should have torn him apart. And yet there he was, standing with his beautiful ass to me.

“Anywhere you haven't been?” I smirked, gulping down another drink courtesy the doughy unicorn mare who worked both the bar and inn. By the way she was talking excitedly to near every customer at the bar; I was surprised she was paying enough attention to get me a drink. Turning he laughed a bit, and shrugged.

“I've been everywhere what matters. 'Cept Hoofington. Only a fool'd go there.” I giggled a bit, my head feeling light from the whiskey. The only remedy for that was even more whiskey. “ Even sheriff-ed a town once in NCA Crest territory fore they took it over and I hadda flee. They left me a bullet in my brain-pan as a parting gift.” He paused, grinning at my disbelief of him as a law pony. “What bout you Miss Gun?” he said, taking his stool back. “Where have you been?”

“Here. There.”

“Oh? Here in Timber, There in Stable 123? Don't tell me you don't have a story. From the looks of you, you used to wrestle Hell Hounds for sport.” And dragons. Also this one time with a griffin and a hydra...

“And profit.” I replied dryly. “My life was not so interesting.” Partly true, I guess. At least it was a boring story. Or. Something. It was hard to think, like somepony parked a cloud over my brain. Needed more whiskey.

“None? Then how'dya explain that daughter of yours? No story about the lucky buck what helped make her?” My... what?

“Serenity, sshe ain't mah daughter.” I slurred after I pounded back another glass. Funny, it didn't burn nearly as much that time.

“Just an orphan filly?” His breath tickled my neck, sending shivers down my spine. When did he get so close? “You must be a kind pony.” Kindest killer he's ever met, I'm sure. Saving orphans and what have you, I was a damned Alicorn I was so goodly.

“Y-yeah,” I chuckled, “Save 'er from slavers...”

Warmth flushed through my body as he kissed me. I was patently glad I wasn't a pegasus right then as I kissed him back.

BANG

“Fuckity fuck fuck.” I wrenched my lips away. Whiskey ruined my ability to swear property. I took a long look at him. He wasn't ugly, but he wasn't really good looking neither, and while his teeth were a ruin, his ass was fine. So I was left with a choice, get some of said ass or figure out why ponies were shooting...

Ass it was!

BANG BANG BANG

Nope, I already made my decision. No amount of shooting was going to change my mind.

“Hireeeeeed!” my head snapped to the stairs leading to the second floor where we had made our room. The light pink filly was flying down the stairs, a face of terror on her... face.

Sex was going to have to wait.

Tearing myself off the stool and away from Grimer, I nearly fell when my hooves hit the floor. Damn, why was the world spinning? It shouldn't spin. As a rule. Serenity seemed oblivious to my plight as she quickly jumped onto my back yelling in my ear, “Raiders outside! They're killing ponies!”

“Why aren't you asleep?”

“W-what! How can I sleep when ponies are dying!” Because ponies die constantly and it's more work saving them then it's worth. Of course I wasn't about to tell a filly that, so instead I stretched and groaned.

BANG.

A bullet shot through the boarded up window and buried itself in the bar an inch from my leg.

Stomping my hoof, the cloud over my head waned and I charged the door, forgetting my lack of firearms.

I burst through the door in a flurry of broken wood and splinters. The single street had become a war zone with over turned carts and barrels used for cover. The NCA was held up on one side, a small band of raiders from the north on the other; both sides seemed to be staring at me in shock.

A black-and-red maned raider got off a single shot before I was on him. The bullet grazed my skin, but I felt nothing. Whiskey is awesome. My metal leg rose and lashed out as I reared. His head resisted for less than a second, before cracking and caving in. His body twitched and fell; his pistol falling from his foaming mouth. I scooped it up and dashed behind a water trough for cover as the rest of the raiders realized what just happened.

My head pounded as bullets shot through my makeshift cover, missing me but splashing my mane with water. “Weww!” I yelled at the NCA troops through the pistol in my mouth, “Cawge 'em!” A battle cry roared over the NCA troopers and bullets started firing. Good.

Turning quickly, I bucked the remains of the water trough towards the gang. It didn't go very far but it was distracting. Turning back, I half charged and half stumbled towards their ranks. My pistol blasted out missing more of its' nine shots then it hit. It was enough though, as one pony in front of me was soaked in blood from a hole in her chest. Hopping over, I charged the nearest pony.

The force of my blow on the poor raider's back was enough to send him to the dirt, squealing like a stuck pig. “Fuck!” One of the raiders backed away from me, “She's a monster.” That was so nice of him to say. So nice I could only smile when his bullet ripped through my leg. “She's a fucking Dash-head!”

I stumbled towards him and chucked the pistol at his feet. “It's empty.” I had no idea why I said that.

The raider took one look at me, another at the gun, and a third at the NCA battalion crawling up behind me. He ran. The rest of the raider following suite save for a single unicorn that was summarily shot to bloody pieces. Dropping to the ground I rested my head in the dirt.

Yum. Dirt.

I came off my buzz in searing pain as the full extent of my injuries became clear. Two bullets tore straight through my recently healed leg, another scraped across my side. That was not to mention the knife protruding from my meaty flank in the centre of the three rocks that made up my cutie mark. "Got stuck in a muscle." Serenity said as she tore the blade from my side, sending fire lancing through me. Swearing under my breath, I clenched my teeth down on a rolled up blanket that tasted of dirt.

"What the hell was that!" The ghoulish commander, who so kindly took my weapons earlier, screamed at me. The glare I sent him, as Serenity applied pressure with a cloth to my wound, must have said something as he quickly lowered his voice. "Why would you charge into a raider gang like that? Do you have any idea what they're capable of?" If it wasn't for the fact we were in his camp, under his own personal tent, I would have smashed his ghoulish teeth in.

"They woke up Serenity." I replied, letting the dirty blanket drop to the ground.

"So." His pale eyes leered at me out from his rough sunken face, "You charged a group of raiders because they woke up your daughter? Are you insane!" Yes. Also drunk. The thought reminded me, I bought a bottle at the bar. Reaching into my saddle bag, I tore out the bottle and took a chug. A burning warmth spread down my chest, and already I could feel the pain dulling.

"She's not my daughter."

"Yes I am!" Serenity chirped in merrily behind me, still tending to my injured flank.

"She's not." I repeated. The ghoulish would have raised an eyebrow at me if he had one. "Really."

"It doesn't matter." He trotted back and forth in the small tent, his mood switching constantly from rage to barely concealed rage. The NCA had set up a small camp on the outskirts of the small village, but from the way the ghoulish was talking they owned the town. Or at least ran it. "I'm thankful for your help, but we do not require your assistance. This is NCA business, and we do not need civilian casualties." See what I mean?

"You've got raiders... uh... raiding your town." I nickered as Serenity trotted over to me and shoved a healing potion down my gullet. Coughing it down, the bullet wounds in my leg started to knit together. "You'll have casualties either way."

"And what do you suggest miss-?" He left it open for me to fill in my name. How nice of him.

"Gun. Hired Gun."

"Convenient." He whinnied, "I'm Lucky." Lucky enough to be turned into a ghoulish. The wasteland continued its macabre sense of humour as I took another swallow from my whiskey bottle.

"Well. You've have the pony-power. Take the fight to the raiders."

"No." Now that was just rude.

"Why?"

"All military action is strictly classified."

"Including actions you don't take." Serenity giggled at my side as she fussed over my leg. The flesh had

almost completely knitted itself back, but she was obviously still worried about infections and the like. He blinked dumbly at me before responding.

“We have been ordered not to attack, unless they pose a credible threat to the safety of the wasteland. As we have them holed up save for a few isolated incidents, we don't have the authority to carry out such an... extermination.” He chewed his lip a bit after he spoke.

“Well. What if they had a hostage?”

Lucky grinned.

I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to say the very next day I found my back legs bound in irons, my fake leg deactivated, and being led blindfolded into a raider base. Why did it seem I was held captive by one raider group or another every three days or so? If history had its say, the leader of this gang was going to get kicked through a window or shot in the head. So you know, it was going to be a hell of a day.

My head cracked against a low door frame before I was pushed through ducking and cursing. Wherever I was, it smelled damp and dusty. Even though they took off my blindfold after the door clicked behind me, I still couldn't see anything. I guessed somepony forgot to turn on the lights.

“Lights, Turn on.” A raider's gruff voice said at my side. Suddenly brightness. My eyes burned and I had to cover them to stop pain flaring up through my head. Suddenly, I knew how Grimer felt. Behind me some pony was laughing, so I reluctantly tore my eyes open, and stared in shock.

I was looking at a room almost impossibly huge; nearly five times as large as Marefort ever was. From floor to ceiling it was coated in pure white bricks, save for thin lines of magical lights shining down across the room. Sitting in huge stacks from wall to wall, and occasionally floor to ceiling was wood. Stacks upon stacks of wood, of all different shapes, cuts, sizes, and textures. Almost all were encased in a strange purple glowing shield. On the far end of the room I could see a small door that suggested this complex lead even further. Why the fuck would anypony need to build this in the centre of a bloody mountain?

“What the hell?” Pain shot through my mouth as the nearest raider struck me. Spitting out a glob of blood, spit, and my shattered tooth, I turned and glare at the attacker but he seemed not to care. Looking at my pipbuck, I saw the place was labelled, 'Reconstruction Center'. Looking closer at the room, I saw that some of the stacks of wood were missing entirely or not nearly as large as they should have been. It made a lot more sense now where Timber got the wood for their town.

The raider camp was just that; A small collection of beds, guns, and dirt near the exit. Only twenty beds, and given there were no more than fifteen raiders who caught me, and none waiting here, I gathered this operation consisted of only them. How the NCA, and all their firepower, was unable to take these guys out was beyond me. “Tie her down.”

I was shoved roughly onto one of the bloodstained mattresses, and suddenly I realized how terrible a plan this was. Deal was a deal though, but that didn't stop my mind to think up all the horrible things they could do to me as they bound me to the mattress. Just hempen rope though, so as at least if it came to that I could break free. My metal leg creaked at my side, and I questioned just how strong I could be with it deactivated.

A pale green unicorn with a spiked mane grinned down at me maliciously, and I figured I would find out sooner rather than later. “A fresh mare, heh, strong too.” I'd to wonder how he could talk with his tongue forked like that. “Betcha have a nice tight a-”

“Somepony shut Snake up.” The closest stallion bucked Snake in the chest, sending him slamming into the ground with a thud. “No pony is to touch her. We'll get more money for a Major if she's unmolested and healthy.” A bald red stallion walked over to me with a grin, “You best hope they willin' to pay though. Rank don't matter here. We'll fuck you bloody if they don't produce the caps.” He chuckled to himself, congratulatory.

The ruse was working then. Lucky had dressed me up all fancy in his green NCA Garb, including his shiny metal badges, and sent me off 'scouting'. All it took then was to wander too close to Raider territory and to take a page from Grimer's book and surrender. Raiders didn't know much, but they knew well enough not to kill a valuable hostage. Even though in reality I was a mostly worthless hostage. Of course, when the report was to be sent they'd write my part as 'an NCA hostage'. It'd be enough for the bureaucracy, I was told.

Serenity hated the idea. In retrospect, I really shouldn't have told her, but there was no way to explain why I was going to be vanishing for a day or so. The only other option was not telling her, and I didn't want to risk her thinking I abandoned her. I didn't mind it when she got mad and yelled, but then she started crying! What was I supposed to do with a crying filly? Comforting fillies was not in my repertoire. I'd hugged her and told her I was going to be fine, but she just pushed me away saying, “that's what they always say.” Saying that, “they always die.” It almost made me reconsider my course of action... but I'd already made a deal. Hired Gun doesn't break contracts.

“What the fuck are you looking at.” I turned my head back to the bald leader. So lost in thought was I that I was staring at the door on the far end of the complex.

“The door. Where does it lead.” My voice sounded annoyingly choked up.

“Fuck if I know.” he cantered impatiently in circles around me as the other raiders cooked suspicious looking meat over a large fire. “Sent a few bucks to check that shit out, but only one came back, riddled with bullets. Said it was a stairway to the fucking top of the mountain but was guarded by fucking robots of all things. Ain't got the ponies to check it out further.”

“Could be loot up there.” And knowledge. Why did I all of the sudden have the urge to explore this building? To eek out it's secrets and find out who built it and why. Maybe because I already had my suspicions and they needed to be validated. It was like a mosquito bite on my back. No matter how hard I tried I knew I wouldn't be able to scratch it, but damn did it itch.

“Could be our graves, are you a fucking idiot?” Yes. Though I'd to wonder why raiders felt the need to swear every second word. Though, these raiders were different than what I'd expected. Save for the blood stained mattress, their entire camp was surprisingly clean, and there were no mutilated bodies to be seen. Not that I was complaining.

“So. How'd you end up here?” The bald pony raised a hoof and I winced and wriggled the binds on my legs tightening. The blow never came though.

“Gotta go someplace. Used to be traders, some of us. But then you fuckers in green came and arrested us. Said we traded to raiders.” he snorted laughter, and Snake laughed too trotting over and sticking his mutilated tongue out at me.

“They did to.” Snake hissed at me, his breath dangerously close to my neck, “My old gang and Reddy here traded, sure as fuck.”

“Fuck off, Snake.” Red said and Snake snapped his head up chuckling to himself.

“Heh. Can't fuck'er, an' now I can't fuck with'er. You're a stickler, you sonofabitch.” He nickered trotting over to the nearest stack of wood and leaning on it. Or rather leaning on the barrier covering the

wood as he never touched it.

“As I was saying, you and your fucking NCA came, called us out and arrested us for trading with raiders. Who the fuck else are we supposed to trade with I asked, but they didn't care. So we broke out, joined the remnants of the group we used to trade with and came here.” he laughed bitterly in my face, “You fuckers turned traders into raiders, and now you reapin' your reward. How's that feel?”

“Like shit.” I admitted. Squirming for a second I helped the rope dig into my legs the more I struggled. Fucking things burned. “Would you go back to trading? If we let you?”

His face was blank for a second before he shrugged. “Don't know.” And I guessed he didn't care either by the way he walked away.

Time ticked by incredibly slowly as I waited for my rescue. Behind me raiders chattered about their plans, how many kills they each got, and what they were going to do to me once the NCA refused to pay. It took all of my mental strength not to say something as they spoke of how they were going to ram a red hot gun barrel up my ass. It was exhausting and completely destroyed what little pity I'd felt after the bald ponies story.

Eventually I found myself drifting off to sleep, dreaming of all the torture these ponies thought up for me.

I woke up to the sounds of an explosion.

My eyes snapped open and turned to the wreckage of the door. That's one way to get in. My heart started pounding and I tried to remember what I was supposed to do. Bullets flew over head, and screams could be heard as the NCA stormed in, guns blazing. Chuckling, I lowered my head again and waited for rescue.

“You and me.” Snake was suddenly standing above me, ignoring the hail of lead. The dread in my gut was only matched by the burning of my shoulder. “We're gunna have fun.” Gasping, the mattress I was on lifted into the air and was thrown behind a stack of two by fours that reached to the ceiling.

Oh fuck.

I took a deep breath as Snake cantered after me a sick grin on his face. The ropes burned against my legs as I struggled against them. Turning my head, I could see Snake and his... snake. Both seemed happy to see me squirm. My gut twisted into knots and I resisted the urge to vomit. Fuck, he was getting close. Far too close. The ropes stung, and I uncharacteristically screamed for Lucky to help me, but my voice was drowned out in the din of gun fire. “Take a good look bitch. This is goin to-”

SNAP

One rope broke and my leg snapped out. He seemed not to notice as he reared up ready to -- it doesn't matter -- as my hoof struck him between the legs, and I could feel him squish under the force.

“Fucking bitch!” He fell. Rolling, he drew his hooves to himself in pain. “I was gunna be fucking gentle too, you bitch.” One by one my legs snapped free except for my powerless mechanic leg. Standing on my three good legs, I pressed down on the stained bedding trying to wrench it free. The ropes tightened around my metal leg but didn't snap. Turning my head, I saw that twisted bastard rolling onto his feet cursing as he tried his best to avoid becoming a gelding. When he saw my gaze he ignored the pain, and charged.

Quickly, I dropped and rolled onto my back as the rope attached to my metal leg pulled the mattress above me. Lashing out with all three legs, the rope finally broke, and the bed slammed full force into

that bastard, sending him sprawling. Scrambling to my feet, I pressed a hoof to my nose and snorted. The small power crystal I'd stored in my nose in case of emergencies fell rolled in my snot. Grabbing it with my teeth, doing my best to ignore the taste of mucus, I slammed it into my metal leg. The sound of the my leg whirling and powering up was the second most amazing sound I'd ever heard.

My head turned to the mattress and the raider squirming underneath. I jumped onto the mattress with my full weight. My legs lashed, pounding into the mattress as blood began to seep out from underneath. The sound of his guts squishing out as I stomped him to death; that the first most amazing sound.

The battle was still raging though. The centre camp was a bloody graveyard, but the surviving raiders were weaving in between giants stacks of wood. The NCA would be hard pressed to search them out in the giant maze-like complex while dodging gun fire and worse. It didn't help that the raiders knew the complex far better than the attacking NCA. Since I was still getting paid, I entered the fray. Charging, I jumped over the body of a red pony who I realized was the bald trader. I felt a twinge of pity for what happened to him, but it melted away when I remembered he allowed scum like Snake to live.

Weaving around a pile of wood I found my first raider. He turned far to late as I kicked out his front legs with my prosthetic sending him face planting into the white brick floor. Rearing, I brought down both legs on his head causing his skull to cave in; spraying blood, brains and bone chips over my face. Spitting, I nearly retched at the taste; but I didn't have the time to be sick so I simply grabbed the fallen pistol, ignoring the taste of blood, and galloped on my way.

Turning one corner or another, I ran face first into three surviving raiders. All wielding automatic weapons. I slid back from whence I came just in time for bullets to splinter through the wood, spraying the hall. Wait, splinters. Me, being an idiot, didn't realize this was one of the towers that had the barrier deactivated. Most of its' top had been scavenged, leaving only a ten foot high wall instead of a tower reaching toward the ceiling.

As the raiders came running up the way I went, I moved to the opposite side of the wall and gave it a great kick. The wood creaked and groaned and fell. Between the crash, and the shouts, I gathered my ploy had worked. Peeking over the pile of wood, I saw one unlucky pony's head sticking out between logs. A single bullet was all it took to put him out of his misery. My shoulder still burned, though.

“Whats going on?” Turning, I saw three NCA troops standing, guns pointed at me.

“I was the hostage...” I said slowly and pointed my head to the pile of wood, “Should be two more alive under there. If you feel like killing.” And with that I trotted off to hunt some more raiders. Any fucker who worked with Snake deserved to die.

I managed to find the last one if you can believe that.

A mare, pretty too, and stupidly I had to wonder what she thought of Snake. She was huddled in the corner of the room crying with her weapon unloaded in front of her. “Puh-puh-please. L-let me go. I-” she sobbed, “I-i never wanted this. T-t-they said if I didn't he-help they'd...”

BANG

Her head exploded.

Tearing my eyes from the blood splattered on the wall, I turned my head to see Lucky, uniform-less, with a smoking gun levitating beside him. “Raiders. They'll do anything to get out of punishment.” His eyes caught mine and he chuckled. “What? Trust me kiddo I've lived long enough to know a Raider and how to deal with them,” They're basically immortal, ghouls that is. I'd to wonder how old he was though. Maybe he was from Eye Glow, maybe he remembered when the bombs fell.

“You could have come sooner.”

“Did they hurt you?” Hah, he actually sounded almost worried.

Looking down I took measure of the rope burns on my three legs, and counted in my wounded dignity before shaking my head. “I’m fine.” my head turned to the bloody mess that the Mare’s corpse made.

“Who’s going to clean this up?”

Lucky shrugged his rotten shoulders, “No pony, who cares. Some fucked up pre-war compound without any real loot.” Not any real loot? Maybe he was blind as well.

“Rows upon rows of timber. More than enough to build an entire city.”

He snorted. “Yeah, and they’re protected by magic. The kind that needs a special code to get through, a code no pony seems to know. The only things useful here were taken. Save for whatever’s upstairs, but those damn robots make it impossible. Trust me, I tried it years ago.”

Whatever. It was stupid of me to ask. I just needed my pay and to get the fuck out of this stupid town. Me and the NCA squad, who I found out suffered zero casualties, left through the smoking remains of the door into the day. I took one look back into the compound with its bright lights and white and red stained bricks before leaving out the side of the mountain. For the life of me I still couldn’t figure out why they’d build something like this in a mountain.

“You’re hurt!” Serenity said, weaving between my legs fussing over my rope burns.

“Not that bad.” I winced as she poked my wounds and levitated a healing potion to my lips. Waving it away I caught Serenity, lifting her up with my leg. “I’m fine. But we aren’t rich enough to drink a healing potion every time I get scratched.” She pouted at me, and I very nearly changed my mind. Putting her down, I turned away and took a look around our small inn room, my eyes reaching the single mattress on the floor. It made me sick just looking at it.

“Humph, sorry.” She hung her head low and made a whole dramatic thing of trotting slowly over to the bed and flopping down in a ball. I sighed heavily and I could have sworn I heard her giggling. The door opened behind us and I was half pleased half annoyed when Grimer walked through the door flashing a rotten grin.

“You’re a lucky lady.” He nickered. “Also a bloody idiot, why the hell would you make yourself a hostage? Do you have any idea what raiders do to prisoners?” More than he knew. Being treated by a bloody foal by some cowardly stallion was the last thing I needed.

“What do you want?” I said curtly not bothering to hide my annoyance. Taking one step back, he gulped as his eyes darted about the room.

“S-sorry,” He stammered, looking abashed, “I just heard you were back in town and thought we co-”

“I know what you thought.” The folly of the day before was becoming clearer by the second. How could I possibly get involved with some pony so weak. Even if it’s just for pleasure, he’d think more into it than was there...

... And every time I looked at him, the only thing I could see was Snake’s forked tongue.

Gulping again, he backed up through the door he came from, and right into a couple of NCA troops. “Grimer?” One of them asked, faceless beneath a green helmet. Drawing back, Grimer felt it necessary to back up into me instead. If he wasn’t already staring death in the face, I would have knocked him out. My shoulder started to burn as the NCA took aim at Grimer. Celestia above knows why.

“Y-yes,” He stammered.

“You're under arrest.” For what, I nearly said until they read my mind and answered anyway, “For raider activity.” How could I not crack a smile at the idea of Grimer being a raider? “Including trading with raiders, slaving and arms dealing.” Those last three I'd to admit were not beyond the realm of possibility. It also occurred to me that most of those 'crimes' were far more accurate on my rap sheet, so I didn't say anything. “Come quietly.” Or else, the not so subtle threat said.

Not wanting to start a fire fight a foot away from Serenity, I 'gently' placed my metal off on Grimer's back. “You should go.” The floating NCA guns cocked. “Now.” I shoved him ‘ungently’ towards the troops who formed around him, and marched him out. His head turn giving me one last pleading look before he vanished through the door. No doubt going to meet the same fate as that red pony.

“You.” My shoulder was still on fire, and that did not bode well. Perhaps less for the single helmeted Unicorn standing before be if he decided to shoot. “You were working with him?”

“No.” The pony stared silently waiting for me to elaborate, “We're escapees from slavers. Met him and his men and paid for security.” He kept staring, what the hell did he want from me?

“We're going to Dise.” Serenity perked up behind me from what was supposed to be sleep, “Have family in The Watchers.” The NCA troop gulped, stepped back and nodded. “Where you from~?” The pink filly asked pleasantly.

“Crest.” He brought himself up, his voice sparking with pride. “Heart of the NCA, don't let anypony tell you different. Second to come out of the Stables, and first to rebuild thanks to Prime Minister Saigns , Goddess' Bless Him.” The little filly bounced off the bed and hopped towards him in obviously fake wonderment.

“Really? Oh wow I heard about it~ is it true General Scoiatel comes from Crest?” The NCA Pony looked down at the little pony quizzically before nodding. “Oooooooh. That's Awesome~.”

“Heh. Guess it is.” The burning in my shoulder subsided as he put his gun away. “You two stay out of trouble.” With a nod and flourish he too vanished from my room. A room, I should mention, I took the time to lock when I first entered. Apparently, locked doors didn't mean as much as I'd thought they did. Even still, I took the time to lock my door again before making my way back to Serenity and her stern grey eyes.

“Did we just sell out Grimey?”

“No.” I shrugged, lying on the floor beside the bed and resting my head on my rope-burned leg. Needed to rest. Feeling weary seemed second nature in the Wasteland, but that didn't make it pleasant, and I hadn't slept since the fight at the Warehouse. And the sleep I had there was anything but restful.

“We did so...” She pouted at me.

“He sold himself out. I didn't force him to work with Raiders.”

“You've worked with the exact same ones,” Yes Serenity, I remembered. And then I killed them. Seemed fair to me. There was no point arguing with a filly, so I closed my eyes and turned on my radio.

“*Hello and welcome, Dise. You've tuned in just in time for your favourite segment, my voice.*” I chuckled and rested my head again. Sure as an overcast was Mr New Haygas the best part of the radio, and not for his news. “*Also, the news! Who would have thought? Well, it seems a high ranking Mustang has been seen converting near the Minotaur Base at Canyon Ridge Bridge. Predictably the NCA has something to say about that, straight from General Scoiatel himself,*” After a brief burst of static a gruffer sounding pony was speaking, “*If it is true, and the Mustangs have aligned with the enemy then we will have to speak very seriously with the other gangs of Dise. As much as we support Dise independence we cannot have traitors within the walls of such a great city.*” The military stallion

finally shut up and let New Haygas speak, allowing me to finally drift off to sleep to the sound of his smooth voice.

KNOCK

“Mmm,” I mumbled in a half-asleep haze, “Don't think it'll fit...”

KNOCK KNOCK

My head shot up and I quickly shook away the blush on my cheeks. Damn dreams. Always ended a second too early.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“Stop that.” I growled getting clumsily to my feet. It seemed my metal leg always worked worse when I was sleepy. Looking at the shuttered window, I saw only darkness peaking in. I guess it was too much to hope for a full night's sleep. Who the hell needed sleep anyway? According to everyone, not me.

Walking slowly to the door, I quickly unlocked it (which is harder than you'd expect without magic) and opened the door... to have no less than three ponies rush into my bedroom making such a racket I saw Serenity twitch in the corner of my eye. Was I really going to have beat manners into these intruders? Then again, at least they knocked before barging in. “What?” I said trying to blink sleep out of my eyes.

“Hired Gun?” One of the ponies shrouded in darkness said. I could barely make out her features, but her voice gave away her gender at least. I nodded. “We... we need someone with your skills. You see, we heard about what happened at the warehouse, and if anyone could do it you could, so we're here to ask you for your help an-”

“How much?” I cut her off. Some ponies really did need to learn how to shut up. Eeping, the pony jumped a half step when I interrupted and stared at her feet during my reply. The two, male, ponies behind her did nothing but glare at me.

“F-five hundred caps.”

“Six Hundred.”

“You don't even know what the job is. How can you bargain?!” The glare I sent her hopefully sent the message that I wasn't negotiating anything. “I mean. Um. Okay the job. I'm sure you've noticed the raiders,” I managed to find the only pony in the wasteland stupider than me. “Well we never did have much a problem 'fore the NCA showed, you-see? They took most of our traders and arrested them as raider sympathizers for 'trading' with them which is stupid because they're traders and that's what they do you know so-”

“Please.” my voice betrayed my annoyance, “breath.”

“S-sorry. Ahem. So. I was saying. After they took them prisoner they threw them in the mountain complex thingy you were in and even killed the Sheriff when he protested! ” By the goddess she actually paused to breathe! “They were supposed to be taken down to work the farm. Except they managed to escape, and the NCA have been unable to fix the problem they caused until you showed up, and now they want to rule this town.”

“And you don't want that to happen.” I stated matter of fact.

She nodded her head curtly in the deep gloom, but my eyes had gotten used to the light so I could actually see who it was I was speaking to. To my surprise, it seemed the bartender of this very inn was

my mysterious employer, but then again I really didn't care. "No. We've had it up to our necks with the damned NCA, but they won't leave. They say we need protection from raiders they created. So we need a sheriff."

"I'm not a sheriff. " I had to dispel that rumour as quickly as equinely possible before she got any crazy ideas, "But I know where you can find one who has a lifetime of experience. "

The streets were dark and the sky was moonless. A stupid thing to say as I've never seen the moon, but I just felt it'd set a dramatic scene. Stupid idea, I know. Even still: it was quite dark, so much so that I managed to get my metal leg caught no less than three times (for those keeping track: a pot hole, some abandoned fencing, and a broken water trough). Inching my way down the only street, I slowly closed in on the NCA encampment hoping to Celestia that they'd all be asleep.

They weren't.

A single sentry stood guard over the entrance of the camp. If it was possible I would have snuck around, but a rudimentary fence of scavenged chain-link and barbed wire surrounded the encampment. It would have hurt too much to climb over, and I wasn't positive I could break through without causing a ruckus. That meant I'd to use my guile and quick wit to get through...

"I need to get in," I said sourly, walking up to the guard who seemed to snap his head up at me. Why couldn't their bloody helmets show, you know, their eyes? Would have made it a lot bloody easier if I knew he was asleep.

"W-why? State your name and rank." Rank?

"Hired Gun..." I paused thinking up a rank and coming up blank, "Uh, Hired Gun?" That's a rank right?

"Whats you-Oh" He shook his head for half a second and stood straight up, "You're the mare what was working for Major Lucky, innit?" Blinking, I nodded dumbly, "Aww hell, that stunt ya pulled back at Timber Yard was amazing. Throwing yourself to the wolves jus' for us. Hell, you're amazing. I'd never have the balls to go through with that, I tell ya what. Pardon my language, you've gotta go, I bet business with the Major. Don't let me keepya,"

"Thanks." I mumbled, lowering my head and walking through the makeshift gate thanking my lucky stars so many ponies equalled my level of stupidity.

The camp was not near as dark as the town, with small candles still glowing inside various tents giving me ample reason to avoid them completely. Luckily, I'd remembered where the 'prisoner tent' was in the complex, having been given a small tour when I was with Lucky the other night. Lowering my massive body, I crept between tents and moved 'silently' towards where I assumed Grimer was kept.

"Who the fuck are you?" A pony cantered towards me, opening a tent flap as he exited. Behind him I saw a glint of pale purple. My pipbuck cracked his temple as soon as he got close sending him sprawling with a thud. He glowered up at me and stumbled to his feet, blood running down his temple.

Fighting here was too loud, dammit, we were going to wake up the whole damn camp. The burning in my shoulder told me I did not have the luxury of thought. Turning swiftly, I bucked him hard sending shock-waves through my legs, and him rolling into the tent. Too loud. Fuck.

Following suite, I galloped through the tent flap meeting Grimer's eyes as I slid to a halt. "What the fuck?" Very good question Grimer, I thought, giving the NCA guard another swift kick his shotgun falling out of his magical grip. "You're here to save me?"

Nope, try again.

“How'd you like to be sheriff?”

“What?” He stood up slowly, the shackles on his legs jingling lightly, “What exactly does that entail?”

“Declaring war on the NCA.” I intoned dully. By his blank stare, I guessed it wasn't funny. “Usual sheriffy stuff. The alternative are the shackles on your legs.” He smirked with his rotten teeth before nodding.

“Aye, sounds like something I could go for.” I nodded raising my foreleg.

CRACK.

My metal leg snapped through the chains on his legs with a single strike. Clearly, my leg was made of stronger metal as I quickly knocked off his back-leg shackle as well. There, now all we had to do was—

“What do we have here?” Fuck.

My eyes shot up, meeting pale eyes of Major Lucky. Oh and at least five guards, including the one I met at the gate. His voice was calm, but I could tell with much reluctance on his part. “You're stepping just a bit past where I am comfortable you bein'. Yeah, you helped us a bunch at the Reconstruction Center, but don't think that means I can overlook this. Jail-breaking, resiting arrest, assault. More than enough for a execution order.”

“You have no jurisdiction here.” Grimer stepped forward, shotgun in his mouth but without a noticeable slur when he spoke. Clearly this was nothing new. “NCA Doesn't rule Timber. Think 'cause you kill the sheriff that gives you rights cause it don't.”

“Shut up and lie down!” Major Lucky bellowed. The pale purple pony winced, his head stinging no doubt, and leaned back so far that I nearly expected him to obey.

BANG

The buck shot tore a bloody hole through Lucky's already mangled ear. “The NCA took everything away from me once. I've tried being nice. I've tried bowing, I've tried listening and running but fuckit I'm tired.” Huh, and here I thought he was a coward. “Step the fuck down and leave Timber alone. You wont get your teeth in here.”

“Do you really think you can slaughter a whole camp?” If he had eyebrows the ghoul would have raised one, “Even if you did you'd bring upon the wrath of the NCA down on you like you wouldn't believe.” Oh good, nopony was paying attention to me. That gave me all the time in the world to reach back into my saddle bag...

... and pull out the last grenade I stole from Nanny Jane.

“Dun gotta.” I mumbled awkwardly, the metal apple cool in my mouth, “Explothion, ponies die. Bad publithity.” The NCA were not well loved, except when handing out food, and even then they were merely tolerated. A stain on their reputation like, say, a riot, could have disastrous consequences and he knew it. The way he took a step back gulping, confirmed that fact.

“You'd die.” He pointed out.

I shrugged. “Got a Contract.” Truthfully, I was hoping the threat was enough, but if it came to that I wasn't planning on backing down. In the wasteland, you had to have a virtue, and I promised myself I'd never break a contract. No matter what came of it. *Survive*, a voice whispered in my ear.

“Yes.” His corpse like head nodded. “We'll leave.” He smirked a bit, stretching his face revoltingly.

“Good.” Grimer stomped his hoof. “Though's a shame. Was looking forward to killing ponies.” Grimer smirked, showing his rotten teeth. With a wave of the hoof and a chuckle, Lucky dismissed his bucks

save the injured guard on the ground. I kicked him again for good measure.

“So that's it huh? You'd betray anypony for a few caps.” Lucky said, backing up a few steps into the night, the candle casting shadows across his face. “Work for Him,” His head motioned to the rather smug looking new sheriff, “then me, Then him again. That the way of it.”

Grimer suddenly stood up straight and clamped a hoof on my shoulder, “You're not thinking of trying to buy her off because she wo-” I turned away, quickly sending his hoof off my shoulder and stomping on the ground, “Would you?” he gulped at me.

“No. Gotta keep him as sheriff.”

“What if there was another contract? Nothing in Timber, would you be interested?” Of course I was.

And thus ended my and Serenity's adventure in the little town of Timber. Even though Serenity did very little, being sick the whole time, I knew she'd be upset if I didn't include her. Sheriff Grimer was reminisce to inform me that the NCA still had their confiscated goods when they left town (except for my rifle which was returned to me after I helped the NCA out the first time). Still, the talkative bartender, whose name I never had the pleasure of knowing, gave me all the caps promised and a couple bottles of whiskey for the road.

It hadn't occurred (Funny how often things don't) to me how long we had stayed there until Serenity complained about having to leave. Between the confiscation of our goods, and me rescuing Grimer from the jail cell I helped put him in; it was two full days, and another day and a half before we actually left the the town. I could recollect the injuries I suffered in said time, but frankly that'd take far too long. Still, it was a good few days, judging only by the caps weighing down my saddlebags.

“Hey.” Serenity walked up to me. Oh yeah, Serenity was feeling better too. I'd taken to standing on the crest of a small hill that shadowed our camp site. “What'cha lookin' at?” With a smile I motioned my hoof towards the horizon. Serenity squinted her small grey eyes, “Dun see nuffin.” Leaning down, I took the little filly by the scruff of her neck and deposited her onto my back. “Oh. I see!”

So did I. There on the horizon highlighted by the red clouds burning from the east, as the sun began to rise, was a great wall. Inside the wall stood dozens of tall buildings peaking above it; sparkling lights shining in only one of every five buildings. Above them, all four tall building stood like monuments to the glory of the past, their lights shining brighter than any star I'd never seen. The tallest of which stretched so high I thought it was touching the cloud line, and at it's tip was the giant head of a pink pony. Its eyes glowing eerily. For days I've heard of Dise. I never believed them until I saw it shining like polished steel. This was Dise: The greatest city in the world. And with help from the Watchers, maybe a place where the small filly on my back could find her home again.

And damn, was it beautiful.

Footnote:

Level up!

Skill note: Sneak 25

(A/N: First and foremost I gotta give mad props to Kkat and her world that without this thingy here wouldn't exist. Also my editor without whom this would be a garbled mess of unreadable messiness, theBSDude.)

Chapter 5: Beneath The Surface

“The most massive characters are seared with scars.”

“We sell guns and gun accessories.”

Robots were not the best for conversations, less so those that hide behind bulletproof glass. They were also terrible barterers! all their weapons had a set price that I was unable to talk down, even with all my and Serenity’s charm.

The robot on the other side was little more than a screen hanging off the ceiling of its booth with various long, spindly arms that waved around uncomfortably. I could just imagine that one of those things could crush the skull of a would-be thief as easily as a pony could crush eggshells, so robbery was out of the question. Reluctantly, I placed my caps on the counter and watched as the robot slid them to his side of the glass and slid my overpriced .308 rounds to me. While I was still fairly wealthy (if you asked me), it just hurt parting with so much money for so little ammo. Though after how well grenades served me in the past, I made sure to pick up a bushel with no care to the cost.

“Thank you for your patronage.” Patrowhat?

“Can I have a gun?” Serenity was resting her forelegs on the counter so she could see into the shop. Peering down at the little filly, I gave her five seconds to realize how stupid that statement was before answering.

“No.”

“Why not?” Really? Have I mentioned I hate children?

“Because,” I said trying out my ‘caring matron’ voice; though judging by her face it didn’t work, “You haven’t been trained. The smallest mistake can kill.” Not to mention giving a mentally-scarred filly a gun was just a stupid idea. Yeah I’m an idiot, but I knew guns and when ponies shouldn’t be carrying them.

“Commooon. You need a second gunner! Back up! I’m the best backup... Ever!” The little pink filly literally bounced as she bragged.

“I’m sure.” How could I not roll my eyes at that? “Maybe, if we find a gun range, and I can see your skills.” She beamed like the sun. However, I still had no intention what so ever of giving her anything even close to a gun.

“Haha! Watch out Wasteland; Serenity is coming.” For catch phrases I’d give that a three out of five, plus some bonus points for actually saying it out loud. Now for any other pony, I would kindly point out that in a few hours we’d be (presumably) safe behind the massive walls of Dise and wouldn’t have much need for guns, but I had to let Serenity have her delusions. Sometimes in the Wasteland that’s all you really had.

Well, that went depressing in a hurry.

I backed up from the booth with my wallet emptier but my guns fuller. All in all, it was not such a bad trade. Looking up past the small armoury, I could see the massive grey wall of Dise looking not nearly as impressive as from a distance. What I’d thought was a massive slab of concrete was, in fact, a loosely held together jumble of wood, stone, brick, and metal that looked ready to fall apart at any second. Atop its ramparts, if I squinted, I could barely make out the signs of ponies patrolling, and for a split second I thought I saw the glint of a scope pointed at me.

Stepping back, I surveyed our options. Getting in Dise was not going to be easy. Because, while from a distance, the main entrance looked like a straight walk, the huge grey ruins of Old Dise stood in the way, most of which was actually inhabited. Just to get into the ruins, before even the city proper, you had to pass a NCA checkpoint, and somehow I figured that wouldn't be the only obstacle into the city. As I looked at the buildings that towered over the massive makeshift wall, I couldn't blame them for wanting to keep the city safe. Every single pony for miles around could see the city, and I was sure every one of them wanted a piece of it.

Me included, if I must be honest.

“Do you think they'll let us in?” Serenity chirped in, breaking my trance.

“Uh,” I shook my head and started onwards to the NCA Guard post literally meters away. Like seemingly all of its kind, the guard post was surrounded by a chain-link fence lined with barbed wire. The rest of the inhabited ruins made due with small walls consisting of train cars, sheets of metal, and, most jarringly, huge metal spikes. Predictably, I chose to take my chances with NCA questioning. Very brave of me, I know.

The Guard stopped me, “State your business in Parasite Mound.”

Parasite what now? Of all the names I've ever heard for towns that was by far the worst. The NCA trooper in his fancy blue uniform and faceless mask managed to glower none the less. An impressive feat, matched only by my not giving a fuck what some schmuck in blue thought.

“Sex, Drugs, Rock And Rolls.” It was the title of a book Wildfire loved in Marefort, and it was more than enough to send Serenity into a giggling fit. Mission accomplished. The NCA troop just continued to glower for a second before turning his head towards the small guard posts at his back.

“This her?” he called out. It was at that point, I became acutely aware of the fact several troopers had positioned themselves around the check point, and all of them had their weapons pointed at me. My shoulder couldn't have burned more if Celestia herself put the sun onto it. Gulping, I turned to the guard station as the door opened with a smash. Pushing Serenity behind me with my back leg, I lowered my body and readied my weapon.

“Took you long enough!” A gravely voiced barked from beyond the door, and I instantly let go of the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. The burning subsided as a certain ghoul strolled out of the office building as easy as you please. “Kick me outta my town, and then you follow me. You're not going to kick the NCA out of here, if that is what you're planning.”

“Not less someone pays me.”

“You're bold; I'll give you that. Do you have any idea what you're doing?” Not a clue. The rough idea was for me to barge into The Watchers, deposit Serenity into their care, find out why Dr. Morowynd wanted me to go with him. After that, my plans consisted mostly of whiskey and trying to find work. “You want into my town?”

I took a good hard look at the grey unicorn with his molted skin, and dead eyes. Then I turned my head to the other side of the checkpoint at a place called Parasite Mound. It certainly fit its namesake with grey buildings half torn down by war and half by age; piling atop each other like a great concrete hill. Skinny ponies darted back and forth between half-destroyed streets and newly-formed alleys, scavenging and sometimes fighting for salvage. It was a stupid name, but I could not think of a single place more apt to it, and from what I heard it was also the easiest way into the city.

“Yes.” I answered.

“You can't walk into a place like this like you walked into Timber. Ponies here have rules, and they

have rulers, and if you don't know both, you'll be dead or dying. Worse yet your daught-

“She’s not my daughter.”

Serenity pouted behind me.

“Whatever. Fact is, she'll be dead too unless you know the rules.” He smirked and stepped back waving a hoof at his office. “I'll tell you who rules and by what rules fo-”

“For a price.” I finished. Yeah, I'm pretty stupid, always have been, but eventually you figure out how the Wasteland works.

“... these disturbing reports have been verified by numerous refugees from the North. If you're just joining us now,” Lucky snapped on the radio in his office as I took my seat on a pillow across from his desk. “The reports have been verified that a huge explosion reminiscent of a Balefire bomb has gone off in the heart of Equestria. What more, the elusive Enclave have been seen outside of their clouds for the first time... ever. What this means for Dise, and our very own Enclave Remnants here in Dise remains to be seen. We'll be reporting back with more news, as it becomes available,”

“Distressing,” Lucky said shaking his head at the radio, “Huddled masses have been coming through the northern passes in numbers unseen. Trying to escape whatever terror the Equestrian Wasteland has to offer, and it has always offered a lot. Back before the war, Equestria was always larger, did you know? Caledonia was what this land was called, and for reasons no pony could remember. It managed to pay lip service to Celestia without becoming a state of her nation despite being several degrees smaller in population due to what was once a sizable desert. Now, what was once Caledonia is the New Caledonia Alliance, and we have outgrown our former masters. Now, they seek our guidance and our power as we once sought theirs, and I have half a mind not to give it to them.” His body writhed as he spoke, muscles tensing visibly where the skin had flaked away on his neck.

“You talk like you were there.” Right, a ghoul. Of course he was.

“I was.” Things were starting to make sense. “I saw the apocalypse, and it saw me. When I close my eyes I see the green flames licking the sky, and felt myself slowly wither and die as the company your ancestors built, Stable-Tec,” he managed to make the name a curse, “poisoned me and my family out of fucking curiosity. Then I, dead, choose to flip off death and continue to live. Rebuild. I helped turn Eye Glow from a graveyard to a city, I helped form the Alliance of the five cities.”

“So? Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I want you to listen to the radio and understand what’s at stake. We built up the world from the brink of death, and now Equestria is coming here to kill it again. They'll want food. They'll want blankets. They'll want water and supplies and they'll want it for free or they'll turn raider.” he leaned in glaring at me, “They always do. Equestrians. Like you.”

“I'm paying you for information, not history.” Couldn't ponies even rant at the proper times anymore.

“But I like history...” Serenity complained.

“Fine,” Lucky said ignoring the plea of the filly, “What do you want to know?”

“How do I get into the city?”

“Three ways.” He smirked at me in an entirely uncomfortable manner, “One, you have a passport, either by being issued one by the NCA or Dise indicating you a resident of either or forging a fake one. Two, you prove you’re a tourist with more then five thousand caps. Three, you provide proof you have

a job waiting for you on the inside.” As far as I could see, all those options were out of my reach. How very helpful.

“What should I expect inside Parasite Mound?”

“Violence,” He said a bit too calmly, “It's not NCA territory, though we've agree to help guard it. A lot of ponies desperate to get into the city live there, some more then others.”

“Do you have anything useful to say?”

“Keep your leg on.” He chuckled a bit. “From what I've seen of your 'habits', you'll fight a Hellhound for the right price, and here that's going to get you or your filly hurt.” he stopped tapping at his desk. “That goes for here as well as Dise. This is not the Wasteland where the biggest pony is top dog. Here, if you overstep or take the wrong job, you'll end up in an alley.”

“So I paid you for a warning?” I already regretted going to this idiot pony for help. Two hundred years old and was unable to give me a solid piece of advice. With a raspy sigh, he magically levitated a piece of paper across the desk to me. Ignoring the pain in my shoulder, I leaned over the mahogany desk. On it was a name and an address.

“We've been investigating a gun shop owner named Deadhead for suspicion of creating fake NCA passports. As it stands, we are several days before being able to convince 'The Finishers' to allow us to arrest him.” He shrugged his shoulder. “From the way I hear it his fakes are good, but expensive.”

I never did find out if his information was worth the caps I spent, as Deadhead wasn't at his shop when I'd gone calling, or even why Lucky needed the caps bad enough to charge for such information. Maybe it was supposed to be of those “life lessons” I have heard so much about. Everything comes with a price, yadda yadda, something about the soul. You know the usual tripe mothers and old mares push down the throats of fillies and colts to try and get them to go to bed. Some ponies really took to that sort of thing.

Parasite Mound (can we stop just for one more second for me to say how much I hate that name?) was mostly what I'd expected from the name: a teeming cesspit of violence and debauchery cleverly disguised as a cesspit of violence and debauchery. You'll notice it's not actually as crowded as it appears. Certain streets were filled with half-flanked stands of questionable meat and supplies while other streets managed to be completely empty, save for a hobo or drug addict sleeping by a derelict building. Rightfully so, I kept Serenity close at all times and forbade her from wandering.

If it were not for the locals, the town actually would have been amazing. At least to me. Tall stone buildings, some even up to five stories, towered on all sides in front of cracked stone streets. Steel poles rose from the ground, and their tips suggested they once held lamps to light the street even at night. They were long broken though, and the buildings had mostly turned into shells of their former self by war, weather, and lack of repairs. So what could have been an impressive town across the Wasteland turned into the refuse dump of Dise.

In front of us, however, was the final gate. The last door to Dise. Not an hour after leaving Lucky, I had happened upon it and stood under it, breathless. It had been a week or more since I woke up in Bridle Hope with a new leg and a new name. So many adventures and battles had led me to this place, but as I stood before it, I had no idea why. It was a mammoth of metal, wood, and, surprisingly enough, thick black paint, and as I looked at it I realized how little clue I actually had. My plan was to somehow get through this gate, find the Watchers, do something, and then make a profit.

The robots guarding the gate didn't help my sudden feelings of insecurity. They were vaguely pony-like

in the way a flower is tree-like. They were stout torso-like boxes with rounded edges lacking any pretence of legs and instead were balanced by two wheels: one in the front, another in the back. Rather than a head, a stand with a monitor served: showing the static face of an annoyed pony with a rather fancy helmet. Off the back of the machine, where a tail should have been, was a beeping red antenna. Most distressingly were panels etched into the surface of the pony, that, when threatened opened an array of huge automatic machine guns. When a small colt tried to make a beeline to the gate, I saw with my own eyes the power of said guns.

Behind me, Serenity wailed.

I took one last look at the bloody colt, his blue body still twitching, and at the five "Ponitrons" guarding the gate before I turned and hefted Serenity onto my back. Growling a bit under my breath, I took a left turn down an empty alleyway and skid to an abrupt spot. Helping Serenity to the hard concrete, I gave her room as she curled into a ball sobbing. I knew she had seen death before, but that of someone so young seemed to have hit her harder than I expected. Knowing this, I should have tried to comfort her, but when I opened my mouth my tongue tied itself into knots. Words refused to come just as they had refused before.

Without words, what else could I do but take a step back and watch? She sobbed deeply, the tufts of her matted yellow and red mane bobbed with her. She was such a small little thing to hold so much sadness. Even if she tried to hide it, her mask was cracked and easy to see through. Stepping forward, I searched for something to say.

"Give me all your caps, an' no pony'll get 'urt."

Turning, my glare stiffened at the site of a skinny-looking grey earth pony with a knife in his muzzle. Was he really going to threaten me? I had to wonder how much he was going to curse his timing as I reared out, my metal hoof connecting with a crack.

Toppling to the ground, he rolled a few feet before halting. A great gash tore through his cheek, and blood was beginning to pool around his head, until he lifted it that is. His grey face was painted red; his weapon nowhere to be found. Strolling casually up to him, I began my usual 'retreat and live' spiel when his white eyes found me: burning with hatred. Before I could blink, pain flared up my chest where he bucked me. Backing up I wheezed as my sight grew blurry.

Not good.

Guessing the second kick was coming, I lifted my metal leg in defence. My metal leg thudded and shook violently as my sight straightened itself. Ducking a third kick, I drove my head between his forelegs. Lifting my head, I tossed him off his feet. Hearing his body slam against concrete, I decided he didn't deserve my mercy. Lifting my metal hoof, I was ready to end it.

"Vat iz this?" My head snapped to the alley entrance.

Please believe that what I saw is true, no matter how ridiculous it sounds. Before me stood five matching ponies of varying races. Their manes were a uniform white, save for two whose roots were starting to show, while over their eyes they wore bright pink goggles. Instead of protective barding, or anything sensible like that, they had on gaudy black, white, and pink striped dresses complete with matching pink ascot. They strutted towards me with such arrogance I almost forgot I was in the middle of the fight.

Oh, and for some reason one of the ponies was blaring background music.

"I said, vat iz this?"

I blinked as the leader sauntered over to me leaving her posse behind. Her dull blue coat seemed slick

with sweat but it looked to bother her none. “Tried to rob me.” I said plainly, my raised hoof not leaving its place above the grey pony's head. Below it, I could see him squirming and trying to protect himself from a blow which never came.

“Iz that so?”

How was it possible to walk with your rump up in the air like that? These strange dress-wearing ponies must have been some sort of magical cult. Or insane. Or both. I was torn between possibilities as she leaned down and sniffed.

“Hmph. Zis is not ze sort of pony ve vant in our city. Girls, dispose of him.” I could not place the accent as it was like nothing I'd ever heard, or wanted to hear. The leader raised her hoof to her chest, “I G-”

“Wait.” The pony stopped and glared at me through her thick goggles. Around me her “gang” grabbed the ragged body of my mugger and dragged him away. Clearly, they cared little for the well-being of their leader if they left her alone with me. “What the fuck?” I enquired as politely as I could.

“Do not tell me you have no heard of ze great Photo Finish. Photo Finish is vat all ponies aspire to be,” Oh goddess, I hope not. Shaking my head, I waited for her to continue. “Sigh.”

Did she just say the word ‘sigh?’

I never had the chance to ask as she quickly continued, her outrageous accent forgotten, “Photo Finish was the most glamorous pony before the war. She had set up a fashion company in Dise and off-instructed students in the ways of fashion.” She looked just a bit frustrated with me. “When my mother found her old studio she devoted her life to bringing back her style to the world. Ponies lost their sense of civility, she said, and by bringing back fashion we can bring back all the socialization that is inherent in it.” She finished her obviously rehearsed speech before her accent returned, “Does zat satisfy you?”

“Yes.” I said as blankly as I could, my mind still trying to understand what I was just told.

Staring for a second, she brought a hoof to her chest, “I go!” And galloped off the way she came.

Turning around I saw Serenity staring at me, her grey eyes huge in shock. “W-What,” She stuttered slightly. “What just happened?”

“Nope.”

You had got to be kidding me.

“Why?” I said, making my voice as flat as possible as my eyes scanned the store. It was disgusting to look at. Piles of guns, barely cared for, were strewn haphazardly around the room. Crates of mixed-calibre ammo were shoved into the corner like a naughty child. My life in Marefort was bucking the inside of my head, and it took all my mental strength not to push Deadhead away and fix up his shop myself. Weapons and ammo need to be taken care of.

The crotchety old stallion seemed just a second closer to bellowing with each word. “Ever since Major Lucky an’ his crew waltzed in they’ve been pressuring me to stop my perfectly legal business practices, and the Finishers are itch-in ta get on the NCA’s good side. I ain’t stickin’ my neck out for some pony what I hardly know so she and her whelp-her whelp who is touchin’ my guns!”

“Serenity!” My voice cracked like a whip. Instinctively, she jumped back away from the shotgun she was toying.

“S-sorry. I’ve just never seen a gun like it is all.” Looking at the shotgun again, I just then realized why:

it was a small pitch black semi-automatic shotgun with a pink stencil design. Not for kids my flank. "An's not like he's gunna keep these loaded. It's safe." Occasionally, she gave this wise beyond her years vibe, but underneath it she was still a kid, and still naive.

"Treat every gun as if it's loaded." Back when I was a filly, handling weapon maintenance and ammo sorting, I was told to treat every gun we handled that way and to treat each bullet as if it was a live grenade. Of course, I scoffed at first, thinking I was too smart (if you can believe it) for that, but after Sidewinder was shot through the neck with a shotgun on accident... well then I took those words to heart. Praying Serenity would be wiser than I, I turned back to Deadhead. "So-"

"Nope. Sorry. Can't do it. 'Less you can convince those Finishers to get the NCA off my back, I have to cut off my legitimate business practices. Shame I know. Now, buy a gun, or get the fuck out." As if I was going to buy a gun from someone who kept his stock in such ill repair. I might as well sign my own death warrant. A jammed gun at the wrong time was just asking for trouble. Yeah, I'm not the smartest pony to ever walk the Wasteland, but at least, I knew how to take care of the things that kept me alive.

Kicking the door open a bit too forcefully, I walked into the street to find a slight drizzle wetting my mane. Great. "Serenity, my leg co-" I spoke, turning around to find Serenity no where to be found. That was until I looked back in Deadhead's Gun Emporium. She was sitting on her haunches looking at the shotgun on the shelf above her head.

Really? So much for wisdom.

I literally pulled her out by the tail. She squealed and whinnied, but I was not in the mood to deal with such childishness. And to think she wanted to be my sidekick.

"Why no-"

"We're not talking about this." I said tossing Serenity roughly onto my back after attaching my plastic leg cover. I knew she was pouting, but I really didn't care.

"What if we get attacked again! By one a those muggers in tha Mound here. Could be dangerous, could be deadly, an extra bull-"

"Would miss, or hit me on accident."

"I would not!"

"On purpose." I continued walking through the damp haze. Serenity protested on my back, but soon quieted down when she realized it was not up for debate. The rain was warm and made me feel a bit sickly as I trudged through it, but thankfully it was not very hard. We needed a place to sleep, and I'd seen an inn near the gate. At least that is what it looked like, and it looked to be open too. The streets were empty as I made my way there, save for a bedraggled blue pegasus on the sidewalk with his green and yellow mane plastered over his eyes.

Finding it through the thin rain was easy enough, as it was one of the few buildings with working lights: lights that read Death Clock Casino. Pushing the door open with my hoof, my senses were barraged. Lights flashed indiscriminately around the lobby in all the colours of the rainbow, and the ghoulish comedian on stage could barely be heard over extremely loud music pounding through the speakers. The colour scheme was as gaudy as it was bright, no doubt to cover over the cracked shoddy looking walls.

"Welcome!" Blinking, I realized I was being addressed. I turned to the small front desk almost hidden in the wall and the two unicorns manning it. "... to the Vinnie May And Franny Mac Death Clock Hotel And Casino." I don't know, but the name didn't seem nearly long enough. "I'm Vinnie May," The

female unicorn bowed.

“An' I'm Franny Mac...” The Male said obviously trying to mimic his partners enthusiasm and failing. “How can we help you? We have every possible vice for sale. What shall it be? Greed? Lust?” What the hell was he talking about? After looking at him for a second, I glanced around the room spotting the separate room where numerous games tables stood just out of reach. Haunting around them, other than the gamblers that is, were multiple pretty young mares in clothes that seemed scanty even when taking into the fact most ponies didn't wear clothes. Somehow the way their short dresses emphasized their flanks made them just that little bit more tantalizing.

“Just a bed.” My voice sounded sour.

“Sloth it is.” He chirped, “A popular choice, now would you like some lu-”

“Just.” I snapped. “A room.” Clearly this Franny Mac was an idiot or a creep if he thought I was going to hire pleasure with a child in my room. Chuckling, he slid the key over to me, and I slid caps over to him. An even trade. Now if only I could think of a reason to smash his muzzle in.

“Thank you, and remember, we here at the Death Clock believe life is too short for virtues.” Right, whatever.

Pushing away, I cantered up to the stairwell and ascended to the second floor. I couldn't help but notice that outside the two main rooms, the hotel let go it's pretensions of excitement and painted every wall white, complete with large cracks and dust.

Our room was that much worse, looking like it hadn't been cleaned in years. A thick layer of dust covered the entire room and I had to grab the single blanket in my mouth and shake it about just to get it somewhat clean. That was not to mention the large suspicious brown stain on the wall or the tooth Serenity found when opening the cabinet. Despite this though, the room was large, dry, and, most importantly, cheap. Flopping down on the bed I closed my eyes.

“Gun...” I felt Serenity snuggle up to my chest. Luckily, I realize she was saying my name not asking for one before I chided her.

“Yes?”

“Do you like me?”

“You're being silly.” I murmured. It had been a long day, and I could already feel my conscious fading. “Course I do.”

“This is So boring.” Wildfire bitched beside me. Apparently, walking slow through identical looking hills was not her idea of exciting. “Ah'm sayin' we need to find a way to liven this up. Whaddya say, hon?” She fluttered her long lashes at me, and already I could feel my face starting to burn up. I shook my head though.

“Pay attention.” The road winded perilously, and I did not want to chance a random attack. We were two of twenty from Marefort assigned by our so called 'protectors' the Crimson Hoof to protect a valuable cart of goods north past their territory and trade off with a group that was to be meeting us there. We had not the pleasure of knowing the nature of the cargo, or why it needed so many protectors and no one really felt like asking. In Marefort if the Crimson said “Jump” our job was only to ask, “Over what?”

“To what, hon?” She giggled daintily. For some reason, the other mares in the caravan were more than happy to give us the rear guard alone, and few wandered back to talk to us. Wildfire claimed that it was

because I was the frightening sort. It was hard to argue with the true sort of logic. Even back in Marefort most give me a wide breadth, and I was okay with that. Now if only Wildfire would do the same.

“Everything.”

“Hmmm.” She arched her back a bit and narrowed her green eyes. “This is bandit country.” Rolling my eyes, I did my best to ignore her and continue after the rest. Until she tackled me that is. “Raider!” She squealed.

Standing strong, I withstood her playful attack and righted myself with Wildfire hanging off my back like a sack of apples. “I am not a raider.” Struggling to maintain my composure, my mouth threatened to crack a smile. “Now g-hnng.” Squealing I tried to shake her off as she tickled me. Deep breaths. Just needed to take deep breaths and resist. With a chuckle, I shook my whole body.

“Die Raider!” Why did she have to be in one of her moods? Her hooves proved too strong. My knees buckled, and I giggled. I snorted, chuckled, laughed, cracked up, and even guffawed as I broke down in the dirt, tears streaming from my eyes from laughter.

“S-stoahaha” I couldn't speak without breaking out louder. Before long, she gave up her attack and stood over me. Her red mane blowing in the wind triumphantly. Looking up, I managed to calm myself. Until an errant wind sent her mane into her eyes. Giggling like a lunatic, I buried my muzzle in my hooves. Oh Celestia, it hurt. Beside me, I could hear Wildfire start to chuckle, and eventually laugh twice as hard as I ever did. This was ridiculous, I thought in between fits of laughter, we were supposed to be guards.

Oh yeah.

Snorting, I raised my head and confirmed my fear. The Caravan had moved along without us. Stifling back the giggles, I nudged Wildfire with my nose. She looked up at me her face red and winded from laughing. I nearly started laughing again, but I managed to stop myself. One of us had to be adult here, and she certainly wasn't rising to the occasion. “They've gone.” I said pointing my head in the general direction we had been travelling.

She jumped a bit, and finally stopped laughing. For a few seconds anyway. “We'll just follow the tracks,” she pointed at the dirt, “Easy pe-” Without so much as a warning, the rain came. In an instant, we were both soaking wet standing in an ever increasing mud puddle. The tracks we were going to follow were washed away faster than we could spit, and I wanted to cry... but at the sight of Wildfire's proud mop of curly raid hair plastered across her face like a wet dog I started laughing all over again.

Once we overcame the second bout of laughter and we managed to get our collective minds together, we followed along the path we had been going. Since our group had been following the road, we too followed it, and none to pleased as the hard rain pounded down with ever increasing force. The water froze us to our very bones, and the mud was far from being helpful. It was sickening to the point Wildfire had cozied up to me as we walked, sniffing and sneezing.

Then we reached the fork.

Suddenly, and for no reason I could see other than to piss me off, the road split into three separate paths. Try as I might I could not suss out which road it was that our companions had travelled. Wildfire shook violently. I didn't get the benefit of time to figure it out either. Growling, I hefted her onto my back like a sack of apples (funny how often that happens). She was heavy, but nothing I couldn't handle as I galloped towards the nearest hillside praying for a cave. For once, Celestia saw fit to answer me.

The entrance to cave stood right in front of me, seemingly glowing through the thick rain. Perhaps it

was destiny that brought us to this particular cave. Easing Wildfire down as we entered, I gave her a minute to rest. She coughed and weezed but quickly got back to her feet grimacing. "Fuckin' chest." She mumbled to herself.

"Lets go in further." The very last thing we needed was a raider gang to find this cave with us asleep.

Although, as we traversed the dank cave it became clear that a raider gang had already found it. The darkness that should have been there was replaced by an orange glow as we walked further. The cave expanded into a great cavern showing the remains of some hidden village. And it was on fire.

Not a lot of fire though, just the smouldering remains of certain stubborn buildings that turned the entire cavern into orange light and dancing black shadows. I marched Wildfire over to the smallest and seemingly safest of these fires and bade her rest. She had gotten us into this mess, but now that we were knee deep in it (and I am not talking about the mud here, though it had stained both our coats to our knees) I had to take charge. "I'll see if there's food." Taking one look at me with her weary green eyes, she nodded, and I trotted away.

Food proved difficult, however, as I searched through the wreckage of the village. Pushing over rubble, I saw a blood stained hoof sticking out. Gulping, I backed up. It was strange that we hadn't seen any bodies, and this one was blackened by fire and crushed. Whatever happened here, I was certain that I did not want to know. "Silver..." Wildfire called to me.

Ignoring her, I continued my search for food making sure to stay far away from the crushed corpse. "Silver." She repeated. After what her games caused I was not in the mood for her whining. Waving my hoof dismissively, I prodded through a small stack of burnt sheet metal. "Silver!"

"WH-" I saw what. Cuddled between her fore legs was a charcoal grey filly.

I woke up in an understandably pissy mood. There were bad dreams and then there were dreams about her; that charcoal filly I'd been doing my best to forget. Even though I knew her name, I refused to think about. Desperately searching for something, anything, else to think about my eyes caught Serenity. They could not have been more different, but just seeing another filly brought back the feelings again. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Hi-hired?" She said her eyes only half open. I nodded slowly. "Are you okay?" I nodded again. "You look like you're about'ta cry..." I stopped for a second to wipe the tears from my eyes before reaching a hoof out to embrace Serenity.

"I'm fine." I know I didn't sound fine, and I sure as fuck didn't feel fine, but I wanted her to think I was. "What time is it?" She shrugged as I turned towards the shattered remains of our room window to see dull light peeking in, filtered through the ever present layers of clouds. I could only guess that it was morning.

With a deep chested sigh, I struggled to all fours, my metal leg dull and motionless beneath me. Damn shame too, as I was down to my last power crystal and was hoping this one would last a little bit longer. No point with what ifs though, so I motioned for Serenity to grab me a new one and carefully inserted it into my leg. I could barely hear Serenity speak up over the sound of my leg whirling to a start, "Does it hurt?"

"What?"

"Your leg."

"Oh." I smiled down at her and shook my head. "Only around magic."

She blinked.

“Magic... but that don't make sense it is magic partly. All Cybernetics are, dont'cha know, else gems wouldn't work for power. How can it hurt around magic?” Her face scrunched up a little as she poked at my leg. In truth it was more like it burned because whatever Starmetal poisoning is but I really didn't want to get into that whole shebang.

“Don't worry.” I said, beckoning her to follow me out of the room.

And it wasn't nearly soon enough. After staying there even the air tasted dusty. Marching downstairs, I took the time to think of some sort of plan. Clearly, I needed to talk to the Finishers and find a way to convince them to stop the NCA from arresting Deadhead, so I could partake in his perfectly legitimate business services, or find away to get enough money to get into Dise myself. The question was answered for me as a red mare in a black, white, and pink stripped dress was waiting for me at the bottom of the steps.

“Mrs. Hired Gun.” What no accent?

“Awww, you should use the funny voice.” Serenity said beside me mirroring my thoughts. Good Girl. All the better to make me seem less stupid.

“Wh-I. It matters not.” Compared to the blue pony I spoke to yesterday, she was markedly less fun. “You are Hired Gun and her companion, are you not?” At least she didn't say Serenity was my daughter. That was starting to get annoying. She kept talking well before I could even confirm my identity. “I have been instructed to bring you to the fabulous Photo Finish. Now, come. It is neither polite nor wise to keep such a wonderful mare waiting.” She put no effort into her speech at all, sounding trite and listless.

I followed along equally as listlessly. I'd been hoping to make the choice on my own, instead of it being forced upon me. Of course, I could always have said no to Photo Finish, but I had a feeling in my gut that it was going to be a really good offer. So as we walked through the rainy streets of Parasite Mound I did my best to not let my disappointment show.

Which was easy enough when Serenity decided to make a show of jumping in puddles. I smiled for a minute before pushing her out and on our way. I didn't want to chance her catching a cold.

I started up my radio to distract her from the ever growing number of puddles, *“It's Mr New Haygas here again with that thing we call, 'the news!' Shocking, I know. Well, it seems a store owner in Bridle Hope has been found dead of natural causes: a three o'eight caliber embolism. As natural as it gets in the Wasteland. Residents are unsure how the assassin managed to kill her unnoticed or why anypony would want such a kindly ma-”*

“Turn it off,” Serenity pleaded. She didn't have to ask twice. That was not really the sort of distraction I'd been expecting, or wanted. How could I have forgotten where I had found Serenity locked up in the first place? Luckily enough, we happened to have gotten to our destination anyway.

It was a stout corner building that had the distinction of looking relatively well maintained in comparison to everything else and to have working lights in all the windows. On the front, painted pink and gold were the words, “Photo Finish Gallery Of Ze Magicks”. I had no idea what that was supposed to mean as we walked into the building.

It was surprisingly subdued. There was a simple pink patterned wallpaper, but nothing nearly so gaudy as the Death Clock Casino, save for the multitude of mares wandering about in their matching outfits. Except, they weren't all mares. I never would have noticed had I not have been staring a bit to closely at one of their rears. I quickly looked away, flushed and drove it from my memory. Thinking

they were all mares would just be easier on my mind.

“We go.” The red mare we had been following said, suddenly gaining an outrageous accent, trotting at a much quicker pace that we were forced to follow. The winding halls had many doors flashing past my vision as we ran. Some seemed like bedrooms, or dressing rooms, but many more were plain rooms adorned with white backdrops and a series of large lights and cameras. The second floor, I learned as we zoomed up the stairs and through it, consisted almost entirely of sleeping chambers. By the third floor of running, I was just about ready to hit this stupid red pony. Why the hell was the boss’s room on the top floor? By Celestia, that was aggravating. What I wouldn't give for an elevator.

We finally made it, red faced and out of breath. The red Finisher bade us to take some time and compose ourselves (meaning make it look like we hadn't just run up three flights of stairs) before opening the door and letting us see what all the fuss was about. The room was simple and nearly without ornamentation save the multitude of cushions on the floor and small pink bed with a huge closet beside it. Inside the room was (gasp) the same blue pony we had met yesterday. “You bring them?” She asked, and the red Finisher nodded. “Wunderbar. Screenshot, go.” She pointed dramatically as Screenshot galloped back out.

“Screenshot is loyal, ja?” She said, directing her glass-covered eyes to me and Serenity, “Not, as you would say, enthusiastic.” She smiled a bit, pointing to a series of cushions in front of her, “Sit. Now.” Something about her voice demanded to be listened to.

“I, Photo Finish, am going to make you a star.” She said, raising a hoof to the sky dramatically as we sat down. Serenity started to giggle until I shot her a look.

“I'm not a model.” Had to get that out in the open as soon as possible. Wildfire bought me a dress once. I'll spare you the gory details, but suffice to say, it did not end well for anypony.

“Dahling, of course not. No. I, Photo Finish, have greater plans for you.” She rose to her blacklegs with her forelegs waving triumphantly in the air before standing back up proper. She sure was laying it on thick. “You have heard of the Enclave Remnants, ja?”

“Vaguely.” I shrugged, waiting for her to stop moving so erratically. “Met one. Claimed his group broke off from the ones above. So?” To be clear, she did not once stop moving around: like a gold fish on dash.

“They are strong! Fearsome! Rich! The Finishers MUST have them for allies! However, a delinquent know as Flare, a former Enclave himself, has taken to Parasite Mound and causing no end to trouble. His drug addled ways are an embarrassment to the Remnants, and embarrassments they do not oft forget. He must be reformed or taken care of. Obviously we, The Finishers, seek to educate the word of beauty and glamour. Killing is not our way.”

“So?” Still waiting for a job offer.

“So say he found a way off drugs or... went missing.”

“Remnants might crack a smile, so?” She faced hoofed dramatically. Adding the adverb dramatically after everything she did was getting redundant so feel free to add it yourself from now on.

“So if you, Hired Gun, deal with said pony, you may find Deadhead's business up and at your eloquent command. Moreover, you may find the greatest gang in all of Dise in your debt. You'll become famous, a rising star in a city of rocks.” I was not sure whether to comment on the creepiness that she knew about me trying to get a passport, the irony of her rising star comment given my cutie mark, or the fact she spoke so passionately she knocked a lamp off her desk with a crash.

“Sure.” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“Now!” She pointed at the door, “You go!”

He wasn't hard to find.

“And Then They Came Flying Outta The Sky Like Whoooooos Whamp But I Wasn't Scared So I Took Out My Guns All Like ChimmieChanga Ratatatatat! BOOM SMASH! Got Shot Pretty Bad But Ya Know I Wasn't Scared Picked My Self Up An-” At this point, I feel it is important to mention all I did was ask him his name. Serenity giggled along with him as he chanted his story in a tone I was positive part enthusiasm and part Dash. No wonder the Remnants thought he was an embarrassment. He was. “And THATS Why They Call Me Flare!”

“And *then* what happened?”

“Serenity, please.” For my sanity, I silently pleaded for him to shut the fuck up.

“Well You See I-”

“Am addicted.” I finished for him, shocking him enough to finally land, giving me a good look at him. His blonde and green mane stuck to his head and down his neck, falling just above his pink bloodshot eyes. Whisking his similarly colour tail behind him, I could see him tense up his light blue body underneath his red jumpsuit. He was so skinny I could see his ribs through his clothes.

“Fuck No! Yeah I Take'a Puff Now And Then To Calm My Nerves Bu-” Did he just say calm? Oh for fucks sake. I charged.

My head slammed into his chest, cracking ribs and sending him sprawling to the ground, wings spread out and losing feathers. Stepping up, I pressed my un-metal hoof on his neck.

“Hired, don't hurt him!” Serenity squealed behind me. Against my better judgement, I released some tension on his neck giving him just enough room to cough uncomfortably.

“Listen. Carefully.” I said, lowering my head so close that my warm breath blew on his neck standing his coat up on ends, “You are an addict. That means The Remnants don't like you. So the Finishers don't like you. I need them to like you. So they can help me.” Was that subtle enough? I was never sure. By the way he was shivering under my hoof on the cold grey street I figured he got the message.

“Man Fuck You! I Can Take Whatever I Want It's A Free-”

“No. It's not.”

“Mr Flare.” Serenity poked her head around my leg and moved close to him. “You should listen to my-” If she said mommy I swear, “friend. She's all like a mercenary, ya knows? You're a nice mister, and I like your stories, but Photo told Hired to get ya off tha streets one way or'nother.”

“Bloody Rainclouds... You Want Me Clean So The Remnants Can Save Face Well Fuck Them!”

“I want you clean.” Drug addicts piss me off. “So I don't have to kill you.” My hoof pressed down hard on his neck, and I could feel his neck bone pressing against my hoof. His face started to purple and he gasped, but I didn't let go until he nodded his stupid drug-addled head.

“Ack. Fine. Bitch. Don't.” He gasped for breath on his back as I stepped back with his wings flapping uselessly, “I. I Wanted To Kick... to kick the Dash. Nothing but trouble. It's good I mean but...” He blinked for a second, staring up at me. It almost looked like he was about to cry. Just what I needed, more crying ponies.

“What do you need?”

“What?”

“To get you clean.” I don't imagine it'd be anything as simple as talking to a scary mare with a metal leg, or 'give me ten doses of 'fixer' and I'll totally quit forever'. Though I am sure those two things helped. “Actually. Serenity, search him.” The familiar burning sensation of Serenity's magic flared up in my shoulder as her horn glowed lightly. A faint pink glow surrounded the Pegasus as various unmentionables flew out of his pockets.

In total, we collected seven doses of Dash, two syringes of med-X, a pill bottle of buck, something called Hydra, three tin containers of Mint-als, and one of its cousin Party Time Mint-als. All of which I stuffed deep in my pack for later. Not to use, to sell obviously. Though it was tempting, as Serenity was removing them Flare thought it necessary to go into a long winded speech about the effects of each of them. Honestly, the idea of chewing a mint and suddenly becoming smarter sounded farfetched to me. According to him, he only took Dash, and just kept the rest to trade with other addicts if need be; I didn't believe him.

“Now. We need you clean. Or clean enough.” All the drugs weighing down my pack made me feel more dirty than the mere thought that I'd stolen them from an addict. A sign of the times I guess.

“Clean enough for what? Yeah it's just a job for you, ain't it? Clean enough then leave me back to the wolves, might as well kill me yo-”

“Shut up.” Apparently, nearly strangling a pony to near death was enough to convince him to listen when you speak. “Enough to get into Dise. You'll come with me. See the Watchers.”

“As if the Watchers woul-”

“They would so!” Serenity literally bounced, “The Watchers help every, and I mean everypony that needs it s'long as you can get to them. They could fix you up something good I tell you. Got special methods of flushin' the body outta toxins and what have you. Come on, whaddya say? Let us help you help us help you help us both?”

Wait, what?

“Wait, what?” Flare intoned before I got the chance. “Wh-whatever. Yeah. Okay. I need Fixer. And... okay this is going to seem odd, but I'm broke.” Taking one look over his skinny body and dirty clothes I raised an eyebrow, “That's not the weird part. It's that... there's this gang, hiding under the Finishers noses. They like, they like sell this shit real cheap like. Without them, I wouldn't be able buy nothin'. It'd help, if they were, you know.” No, I did not. “Disappeared .” I raised an eyebrow, “Fucking kill them, I mean.”

“Oh.” Huh. Now that was a dilemma. I shook the rain out of my hair as I thought. Normally, I would have to charge a lot for a job like that as it involved murder-like activities. On the other hoof, this whole thing was more like a huge job with the ending being entrance to Dise. Then again, I just procured hundreds of caps worth of drugs (or as Deadhead would call them 'perfectly legal reality modifiers'). I guess a few drug dealers were worth it. How armed could drug dealers be. “Okay.”

“Hah, you ain't so bad, Miss Hi-”

“On the condition you come with.” The shock on his face was clear and very amusing. The thing is: I couldn't justify leaving Serenity by herself at the hotel in a place like Parasite Mound, and I certainly was not going to let a drug addict look after her while I was away. The only logical choice was to bring them both and have Flare and Serenity stay far enough back to avoid fire, but close enough I would be able to keep track of them. Then again, I am an idiot.

“Now.” Maybe I should have waited for him to agree, but that would involve giving a damn what he

thought. "Where is this base."

"Below." He said shakily.

"Below us?" Well that didn't sound good at all.

"Ain't you never heard of the Paradise Sewers?"

Sewers was a patently incorrect term. Apparently, the massive underground tunnels buried beneath the last city were created as a fallout shelter by a wealthy stallion who owned most of the city before the war, Mr Wallkirk as Flare called him. Not trusting Stable-Tec to protect non-Equestrians, he built them under the guise of a massive storm drain for the yearly storms that often flooded parts of the city. From the looks of it, they did neither job well. Unless you counted being a pain in the ass to get into a job well done.

Sure there were many ponyhole covers and drains that led into it, but there was no way for anypony (unless you're a Pegasus) to go straight down without, you know, falling. So we had to find and locate a small rubble strewn building with one of the few entrances available in the Parasite Mound. After finding it, it was up to me to push the heavy lid off the hole in the ground revealing a spiral stair case that was disturbingly narrow. After the harrowing climb, for me anyway as Flare just flew and Serenity rode on my back, we finally made it into the sewers.

We came out of the small stair room into a long hall with vaulted ceilings and grey walls covered in cracked and yellowing with decay. Even still, the lights on each wall were still lit. The floor was a metal grate that made my leg clang nosily with each step. Below the rusting grate was a swirling river of green water that seemed to flow into small crevices in the wall.

"Know anything else 'bout this place?" The sound of water leaking in through cracks in the ceiling or from grates connecting to the surface was going to drive me bonkers. Even Flare was preferable.

"I know everything! Back before I quit the Remnants, we used these tunnels for secret transport. Goes all across Dise they do," Well, why the hell didn't we just take these instead of going through the front door, "But all the entrances to Dise proper been claimed by some gang and are monitored and the like. Still a bribe is oft' 'nough to convince them, but they might take it and kill you anyway," Sounded like a lovely time. "Still lotsa ponies live down here," He motioned his head to a door to my right, "That leads to a small village. Nice folk. Most're shy though, stay underground cept for trading and scavenge. Though plenty of scavenge to be had here. Lotsa places here weren't radiation proof so ponies died clutching their remaining treasure. If ya don't gotta problem scavenging from corpses." Well if history has shown anything...

"Wait." He stopped turning to a small door with a brown stain on it in the shape of an 'X'. "In here. Okay. Just go in. Take them out. Easy peasy lemon squeezy, right?"

"Right." I bucked open the door with a resounding crash.

The poor guard didn't know what hit him as my bullet shot through his brain pan, splattering the wall with gore. Squealing behind me, Serenity hid behind Flare. As much as I hated bringing her to a place like this, I could see no other real way of protecting her. Yes, I'm an idiot, why do you ask?

The hallway on the other side of the door was different than the main hall. It had no grate on the floor or river underneath, and while its walls were still high they weren't as much so. The lights on the wall were similarly still working, but very dim.

Oh yeah, and hanging on the roof was a flayed pony in a spread eagle position like a grotesque flag.

“Flare.” I warned. “Make sure Serenity does not look up.”

Me, I couldn't help myself. The thing was staring down at me with empty holes where eyes should have been with its lips peeled away showing a row of broken teeth. Its' entire coat and skin was stripped away to the muscles underneath, some half clinging to the body and half falling down loosely revealing bones underneath. Tearing my eyes off the monstrous monument to pony indignity, I made my way back down the hall.

The doors on either side of the fall way seemed for the most part, boarded up and blocked with debris, so I ignored them. The only door that seemed to matter was the small door on the other end of the hall. Which opened.

That wasn't good.

Two ponies appeared from inside the room, which seemed to me to be an excessively small broom closet. I never did get a good look at them as I realized one was magically holding a rocket launcher.

No time. I spun around. Grabbing Serenity and Flare, I dove behind a pile of debris just as a rocket flared past.

The sound was deafening. The light blinding. It exploded against far wall, covering us in dust as we huddled in relative safety. Minutes passed until the roaring in my ears settled down, but my head still stung and voices were fuzzy.

“You okay, Hired?” Serenity said, looking up at me surprisingly unhurt with her horn glowing lightly. Nodding, I turned my attention to the door. Peeking out from the rubble, I scanned for out attackers. Only. They weren't there. The only sound I could hear, and admittedly my hearing was still weak, was a faint trickle of water from the main hallway far behind us.

“Wait here.” Flare nodded dumbly, biting his lip so hard it looked almost bleeding. Sneaking out from behind the rubble pile I turned back to where we came. Past the door I kicked in, the grey wall was black and even more cracked with the entrance itself measurable larger than it had been. Making my way slowly, I crept as low as my massive body could go until I reached the supply closet.

To find two charred ponies.

From their back legs to their necks, they were a blackened mess of burnt flesh and hair smelling vaguely food like. My stomach rebelled at the thought and I quickly turned away from them, motioning for my gang to move forward. Not before pushing the corpses back into the similarly burnt room and closing the door.

“What happened?” Flare said with strange brevity.

“Backblast.” Another weapons lesson from long ago. Rocket launchers expel gas out the back to avoid massive kickback. But if fired with ponies behind you or in a sealed room, the effects... were as seen. Potentially deadly, and always stupid. “Not the brightest ponies.” Serenity giggled a bit, while Flare just shrugged looking around warily.

“Shouldn't we be... ” He started

“Going,” yeah yeah. Can't I bask in the glory of the one thing I actually know?

The next stage in our roaring rampage of revenge was easy enough to figure out. The drug dealers were not the brightest, as already pointed out, and their sections of the sewers had every door blocked save the ones that lead to the bosses chambers. So I simply went through the only possible door on the right side of hall beside the storage closet.

This room was nothing more then a small room, with three bunk beds pressed against the walls. I

scanned the room twice over making sure no ponies were hiding in wait. If they didn't know we were here by now, they were truly not very bright, I took a single step.

BEEP.

Fuck. Looking down, I gulped, already feeling sweat trickle down the back of my neck. Under my hoof was a small disk that was beeping ominously up at me. Slowly, I started to lift my hoof up.

“Wait!” Flare zoomed past me, floating at eye level his wings beating hard, “Don't move! That's a mine! You'll blow yourself the fuck up, and less you wanna lose the other leg just don't move.” Nothing made a pony more fidgety than being told not to move. “Just. Don't. I'll get it.” Reaching into his pack, he came out with a bobby pin and a screw driver in his mouth, “Ah got 'is” he mumbled.

Five tense minutes later, the beeping stopped.

Lifting my hoof off slowly, I was relieved I didn't explode. Grinning, the blue pegasus snatched the device in his mouth and sliding it back into his pack. “What? I used to be an explosion expert way back 'fore I quit. Know how'ta make'em explode and you know how to make them... not... explode. Ya know?”

I'd had no idea, but I was still kicking. I attempted to pat him on the back to no avail because at the touch he quickly twitched backwards leaving me hanging.

He said, “S-sorry. Last time-” I almost choked him to death. Funny, in wake of him saving my life I'd forgotten that fact. Honestly, considering the facts, I was surprised he went through the trouble of saving my life to begin with. I tore him from his comfort zone into a bloody war zone, he should want me dead.

Ponies made no sense.

“Lets go.” The small bedroom was small enough, and completely empty of life. Not wanting to waste time I charged forward-

“Wait!” Flare screamed, “Aint'cha gunna look around.” Look around? I turned my head one way. Then the other. Boxes, boxes, bed, trash, locked safe, bed and bed. Looking around done. “I mean scavenge, They've got to have good loot.” Please tell me he was kidding. From the way his pink eyes pleaded with me, I knew he wasn't.

“We're kinda of in a hurry.”

“Bu-”

“Hiiiiired,” Serenity whined, “Just for one minute,” How could I say no to those big puppy dog eyes. Fillies were tricky.

“Five Minutes.” Much squeeing and position giving away was had. Then again, I was pretty sure by that point everyone was well aware we were coming, and I kind of liked the idea of ponies cowering behind desks wondering if we'd ever come for them.

“Hired.” I heard the pink filly wail as her magic struggled with a locked safe. “Helllp!” With a heavy sigh (funny how often I sigh, isn't it?), I slowly walked over to the small metal box. “It won't open, you need to-”

CLANG

The metal box reflected my leg, sending it shooting back so hard I nearly lost my balance, “Why would you do that! You can't kick everything open. You're going to ruin your leg!” Sure I could. I just needed more practice. Trying to step my metal hoof down, I suddenly wobbled, nearly toppling over before I

took my weight off it. The fucking hoof of my metal leg was bent all askew and Serenity was giggling triumphantly at my distress. That was, until I slammed the damn thing down as hard as I could, forcing it back to its original state. Mostly.

“Time's up. Lets go.”

All counted we had collected: A huge pile of trash. I loathed the thought that I'd have to try and sell that shit later. Not that I really had the option to throw it out the way Serenity was watching me. What the heck would I ever need wonderglue for? Maybe if we had actually managed to open that damn safe it'd have been worth the time (and embarrassment) it took. “We done?”

“Haaah. Thanks. We need ta scavenge more often. Back in tha Watchers they used to tell me the Wastelanders would be much better off if they stopped to look through empty rooms. He said could be your life in there.” Because that made perfect sense. “Lets go.”

Like the rest of this poorly designed drug dealer base, the room was completely linear. Two doors, the one we came from and a wooden door on the other side of the room.

It couldn't be more simple. In fact, this whole adventure had been just a teensy bit too easy. Apart from nearly being blow up... twice. I've changed my mind this whole adventure had been a pain in the flank and it'd be a goddess send once we finally got out of this filthy, stinking hole in the ground.

I knocked twice on the wooden door shouting through it, “Listen up. Who's ever in there. Leave now. Leave everything on the floor. You live. Fight back. You die.” I backed up a step and waited, my eyes watching the door. I was just hoping the remaing drug dealers on the other side were sane enough to take my offer. They weren't.

Then it exploded.

Shrapnel tore through the air as the shock wave sent me spinning to the ground. My ears roared as my body smacked against the the floor. I groaned as the flames washed over me briefly, leaving me sore but alive. Lifting my head, I saw the body of a purple mare drug dealer, glowering at me through the smoke. There was no time to think.

I rolled quickly on my back, a shot ringing against the floor where I'd been laying. Struggling to my feet, my hearing returned, broadcasting the groans of my companions behind me... followed shortly by a second shot. Pain struck through my ear and already I could feel the blood flowing down my cheek. I didn't allow her a third shot.

My first bullet tore through her leg and sending her to a bloody knee. The second slammed into her chest with a meaty thud. She looked straight at me as the life faded from her eyes. Gasping for one last breath, she slowly toppled over; a pool of blood forming around her corpse.

I forced myself to look away, releasing a breath I realized I was holding. My ear throbbed and my face felt sticky with blood. “Well.” I turned to my companions, “That went we-” It had been going so well too. Cleared out a drug nest. Helped out a community. Saved a pegasus from addiction. And got a pass into the City Of Lights for our efforts. Of course I couldn't have such luck.

Serenity was lying in Flare's forelegs breathing heavily. A large wooden splinter was lodged into her chest.

Footnote:

New perk! Element Of Loyalty: When you drop below 50% HP, companions gain DT.

Skill note: Explosives 25

(A Special thanks of course to that marvelous mare, Kkat. As well as a thanks to theBSDude and Errant who made this readable without bleeding eyes)

Chapter 6: Murphy's Law

“If anything can go wrong, it will...”

“She, she is dying,” The doctor said.

My hoof stomped down cracking concrete. “Then. Fix. It.”

I didn't remember much of what happened after the drug dealers lair. Visions of fire and rage swam through my memory but were gone just as quick. What I do know is that me and Flare managed to safely carry Serenity back up to the Finisher headquarters where they proved themselves useless. Had her life not been in their hands I would have killed them all.

“Ve cannot.” The Finisher's doctor said with a shake of her head.

“Do it. Anyway.” My voiced was cracked and strained, while tears stung my eyes. Most ponies on the verge of tears looked pathetic; I looked frightening.

“Ve...Ve have not ze technology.” The mare was visibly shaking over the body of Serenity.

She was strapped down to the table her coat pale with life visibly leaving her eyes more each second. The stake was still in her chest stained with blood, and the doctors were too afraid to remove it. They said she'd bleed out if they tried to remove it. They said she needed a blood transfusion. They said they needed medical equipment they didn't have. They needed to save her, because if they didn't nopony could save them from me.

The door creaked open and a familiar blue unicorn stepped sterile white room. “Hired Gun.” She said softly, “Iz she well?” How long have I been in that room? I really could not say. It may have been ten minutes, or an hour. But as I saw Serenity draw less air in with each consecutive breath I knew it had been far too long.

“She's dying.”

Tension blanked the room like a thick fog.

“For what it iz worth, I. Am sorry.”

What the fuck? Who the hell bows like that when a filly is dying five feet from them? Of all the times to stay in character this was the worst. Rage boiled my tears away.

“You will be.”

“I-” She was clearly not accustomed to being threatened. There was no need to tell her that I wasn't threatening, I was promising. “It shall no come to zat. I, Photo Finish, have a plan.”

I didn't like the sound of that. Nevertheless I tore my eyes away from her and back to the small filly dying on the bed. She seemed so small at that moment. Just a tiny little thing writhing in pain as her body failed her. My mind raced back to the time I met her. Lying in her own filth. Chained like a monster. She seemed so small then too. So vulnerable. She was just a filly, it wasn't fair that Celestia deemed her to die. To die so close to her home. Tears fell from my eyes for a second before I wiped them away. I could not allow that to happen.

I trusted this Photo Finish little, and her plans none at all. But anything was better than standing around useless as Serenity died. A fools plan was better than no plan. Even if it was a fools plan that got her

into this mess. "Tell me." I said my voice cracking.

"Flare, come in."

My neck snapped to the door. This was his fault.

His blue face purple.

He gagged. Dying.

It took five of them to pull me off. Had I not heard Serenity whimper it would have taken more. I should have killed him. Let him die on the street like the rat he was. No pony would have cared. No pony would even have noticed. Instead, I took pity on his drugged up ass and went along with his little plan. Raid a drug dealer's base. How hard could it be? Four ponies died in those sewers, and a fifth was coming shortly. I don't care who he was, his life wasn't worth that of five others.

Carefully, I wiped the sweat off Serenity's brow. Behind me I heard Photo Finish go on about... something. I wasn't really paying attention to the details.

"I am supposed to put her life in his hooves?"

Once again I found myself without any viable options. Serenity was dying of internal injuries and the Finisher's doctor had done everything in their power to prolong her life. But they didn't have the abilities to actually remove the spike in her chest. Well they could remove it but she'd die of blood loss before healing potions could fix her. If they gave her healing potions with it still in her chest it'd cause massive internal damage. They didn't have any options. I didn't have any other options.

That is how I found myself in front of the great Disenchantment gate beside a... a something. It looked almost like a carriage but had no visible wheels that I could see. Instead it had a big block of mechanical whosits that Flare claimed was an engine that allowed him to fly with it attached to him with relative ease. Most importantly he claimed it would ride smoothly with Serenity in the back. The Finisher's 'doctor' would be riding along side too, even if he was a sham and deserved a bullet in the brain.

"Iz no choice."

Photo Finish, for her part, was surprisingly accommodating. I was sure it wasn't my charming personality that made her put so much effort into getting Serenity help, but I didn't bother asking. Don't get me wrong. I was grateful for her help; I just would have been more grateful if it wasn't her fault. Well, not really her fault but she did share some of the blame as did Flare.

And me. Of course. And my idiotic means of protection.

"What if he crashes?" Far from my over-emotional state earlier I was feeling much calmer. Though that could have had something to do with the whiskey.

"Ponies die. Unfortunate. But Zat vill not happen. You have mine, Photo Finish's, word on that."

"I'll ride with her."

"No." Flare said harshly walking in front of me. Behind him I saw the ponitrons manning the gates eyeing us with suspicion. "I am...not very strong. Can't take the weight." My muscles tensed, and he must have noticed. Walking towards me he whispered in my ear, "*It's a long run. If you want to keep up. Might want to try some of what you took from me.*"

Dash.

Like its name sake it made you go faster. Think faster. Act faster. If what I have been told was correct

it'd make you forget your weariness and make you like a bolt of lightning. The Watchers base was on the other side of Dise (not a small distance I assure you) and I was tired, sore, and a little bit drunk. I was not entirely sure I could run the distance, and I did not fancy leaving Serenity alone with strange ponies for any amount of time.

Photo Finish went first, giving the ponitrons our newly acquired, perfectly legal, forged passports she had gotten from Deadhead earlier that day. Three in total, as she herself had no intention of leaving her city. I marched carefully behind Flare who was hovering with his cart just above ground level. The five mechanical things watched us eerily as we passed through the gate. I did my best to look forward and ignore the corpse of the colt that had been gunned down the day before.

In my mind, the colt was named Mischief.

With a crash the gate shut behind us. We were here. This was Dise.

To my right with shining lights in every window was a huge building with a pool in front blasting jets of water into the air. The water streams danced and shimmered in multicoloured light as music blared from hidden speakers. The huge flashing words 'The Moon' doubled as its name and the entrance as stairs lead into the huge 'Os'. What caught my attention most of all, I was ashamed to say, was the pretty young mares in front. Gulping a bit as heat rose to my cheeks, I turned my head.

Directly across the street were a series of smaller hotels and skyscrapers that mostly looked empty, or at the most under filled. Except for a large hotel down the street. It was made up of three large circular buildings that looked almost like large barrels of alcohol connected by a series of bridges and a large rectangle centre first floor in which each building rose from. In front of the building was a large sign stating 'The Ale House!' complete with exclamation mark.

And there were so many ponies!

The street was so large it could have fit fifty ponies abreast and very nearly did. Ponies of all builds and races swarmed the streets going too and fro. I counted numerous NCA ponies in full blue uniform but obviously not on duty by the way they staggered and swerved. Apparently, I wasn't the only pony what liked a good drink. There was no doubt that this was Dise.

The last city.

None of that mattered. I shook my head. Not the lights or the ponies. Only getting Serenity to safety.

"Flare." I turned to him as he hovered waiting for me. "Go."

He shot off like a rocket.

Dash. Just one little puff. It couldn't hurt. I needed the speed.

One puff was all it took. Suddenly, everything in this obsessively bright town was. Shiny. So shiny. *Look at all the pretty ponies, I thought, I could just go dancing with them-where does HE think he's going!* I could beat him. I was faster. I started after leaving a wave of confused ponies in my wake.

My hoofs beat against the ground like a song. Smash clang smash smash. Smash clang smash smash. I found myself staring at my leg. It sparkled like the stars in the light. Why weren't they all like that? It would have made things so much- "Watch out!" some pony screamed.

Jolting upwards a huge multi tiered water fountain with the stone figure of a stuffy military pony rearing victoriously grew out of the ground. I swerved and circled around it but ran straight into an excessively tall pale green unicorn with a red and orange striped mane.

"Sorry. Nice To Meet You. Gotta Race," I yelled, giggling to myself as I tore away from the pony and continuing my race. I recognized for half a second that the fountain marked a cross road in the city with

four streets heading off, each equally large. And shiny. So shiny I wanted to go down them.

Until I saw the cart zooming ahead of me. No fair cheating.

I zipped off again as my hoofs began their racing song. Smash clang smash smash.

Past the fountain more buildings rose up to my right. Lots and lots and most even glowing. Largest of all was a wide stout hotel named 'The Clips And Clops' judging from its flashing sign. It would have been ordinary, even if you counted the abnormal amount of ponitrons standing guard around it, (and the whole block really was swarming with those mechs) except for on top of it was a tower. Not any tower but a huge one that rose up like an arrow to the sky. I had to stretch my neck back to far it hurt just to see that the top floor was shaped like a Pink Pony with an equally pink and poofy mane. It seemed to smiled across the city, the tip of its hair lost in the clouds. I wanted to just watch it as I ran past.

Until nearly ran into a pegasus with two clouds as its cutie mark.

Leaping nimbly over the pony, I skidded on the other side and kept racing.

I was getting a feeling for this city. To my left was going to be another fancy hotel that shattered what I imagined possible. Except there wasn't. I pouted as I weaved in between ponies. There was a hotel, and it was a fair bit larger than all the other buildings near it but instead of looking high and fancy it looked worn and beaten. Where other hotels had kept their pre-war names this hotel was notably scarred where the old sign was. Instead a huge banner with the words 'Black Salamander Hotel And Casino' painted crudely on it was hung. The only thing even remotely unusual was fact unlike the other three city blocks I passed every light was shining from every window of every building. Right. Boring. Racey racey.

Ahead of me I could see Flare zipping along. I was catching up. He had to slow down to dodge a group of ponitrons escorting an ageing mare in a walker. I too swerved to dodge them but managed to keep my super impressive speed. Hah. I was going to win. Score one for Earth Pony awesomeness.

The road narrowed suddenly to a stone path. The main blocks of Dise were behind me. We were getting closer I knew. Closer to the Watchers. On either side of me in states of disrepair were two large octagonal buildings surrounded by what must have been rather nice looking parks, but had since been burned and charred looking black. A sign I raced past called the place "Luna's Low Income Residency." I couldn't help but notice a multitude of pegasi flying around the left. The right building looked deserted but a shanty town of make-shift houses were perched all around the building.

Whatever. I was running. And losing. Damn cheating pegasus!

We rounded around the Pegasus infested building following a new path and running face first into a wall. Not the great Dise wall but a shorter wall of mortared brick inside Dise. It seemed to cover a large swath of land and was made in the style of castles of old with ramparts and the like. It made me want to be a knight. Sir Silver Storm at your service. Pretty maiden to rescue? Not a problem! A lance is all I need...

Two large wooden gates creaked open as I finally reached Flare and his flying waggon thingy.

"Hey!" I bounced around his side, "Hey. Watcher Guys." Guarding the wooden gate were four ponies with battle-saddles. "Hey! Pay Attention. We have An Injured Filly." The guards ignored me completely and talked in low hushed voices with flare. Assholes. I was being serious.

"HEY! Listen! Filly Here. Needs Care And Shit, Get Your Best Doctors On It Before I-"

The guard with a spike mane glared at me before speaking into a metal-device-thingy on his foreleg, "Got two addicts here. Looks like dash. And a Critically injured filly. Advise."

"I Am Not An Addict," I said bouncing for a second before running to the other side of the cart. "Listen, I-" I stopped talking as a muffled voice emitted from the guards foreleg. I didn't really hear what it said as I suddenly found my Pipbuck far more interesting. It had lights and buttons and switches and I had no idea what half the shit did but it made it that much cooler. This thingy could hold the answers to all my problems if only I could twist this stupid thing right.

Though I wasn't paying attention to their stupid conversation I did hear the term, 'Number Six' come up multiple times. And then something about restraining... unruly... I really should have payed attention.

Next thing I knew somepony had pressed a sweet smelling rag against my face.

And then blackness.

"Ehh..." my eyes fluttered open slowly seeing nothing but darkness.

Slowly I rose to my hooves. Only that didn't happen. What really happened is I tried to rise but thick leather straps kept my legs tied down making me accidentally smash my head off the table I was strapped to. I was just glad no pony else was around to see that sorry display.

No pony else...

Someone tied me down face first into a table and now they were nowhere to be found. In my experience ponies rarely tied you down without being somewhere close. You know in case them what they tied down tried to escape. Not everypony would consent to being tied down, and to be frank it reminded me of a forked tongue. Not something I liked thinking about. Ever.

I struggled with the leather straps my eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light. If my eyes were right I was in some sort of medical room. Rows of medical equipment lined the room. Had I any idea what any of there were, or did, I would tell you but lacking in such knowledge all that can be said is their seemed to be an abundance of tubes shiny eerily in the darkness. Either a medical room or a mad scientist's chambers. Or both.

"Oh." Light burned my eyes.

Squeezing them tight I slowly opened them to see it coming from a small lamp hanging from the mouth of a unicorn stallion. I gathered he was a doctor by the stethoscope around his neck. Slowly and deliberately he placed the lamp upon the table before turning to me with his small black eyes. No not black, but a deep grey it looked black. Not creepy at all.

He chuckled, "Yes. My eyes. When I was but a colt the other fillies and colts thought I was a demon. When I can they'd run from my presence." He smiled amiable which only served to make me squirm with my restraints more. "On the other hoof it served me well, for whenever I commanded one to fetch me a Sparkle Cola it was not long before it was in my hooves." He licked his lips at the thought.

"Why am I tied down?"

"To keep you from moving." He guffawed and turned from me facing one of the medical stands or something. "I kid. It is standard procedure for addicts. Some do not wish to be here, and sometimes it is better they are not given the choice." As he stood with his flank to me I could not help but notice he lacked a cutie mark. Or rather where it should have been looked like it had been burned.

"I am not an addict."

I gave my very best growl as I turned and stared straight ahead. It was the most comfortable position I could get without breaking the leather straps, and I wanted to save that for a climactic turn in the conversation. It was at that time I realized I was an idiot, and that I was actually in a blue tarp tent not a

building proper. Most ponies would have noticed that much sooner.

“Do you know,” He started turning his blue body to me, “what happens when alcohol and dash mix? It doesn't react right away, but within the hour it takes two already dangerous chemicals and makes them deadly. Back in Eye Glow, young stallions and mares dared each other to take them together. Called it Ghoul Blood, said you felt like you could live forever. It'll get you higher than you've ever been, and then kill you. One time they found fifteen corpses around a bonfire in some abandoned building. You'll never guess how they died?”

Groaning, I slammed my head into the table. How the hell was I supposed to know that? He flipped his short cropped black and red mane at me. Classy. “Lucky your friend Flare was smart enough to tell us what was going on.” It was his idea to take the dash. Just so I could... I could.

“Serenity!” I shot up so violently I tore two of the leather straps binding me asunder. The doctor took a step back chuckling.

“Impressive. The filly is fine. She is currently sleeping peacefully. You were lucky to get her here just in time. Very. She is such a nice filly, I remember her well from her time here, and she had a great deal to say about you. You knew Doctor Morowynd, did you not?” I nodded. “As we heard. You had suffered starmetal poisoning. A sad thing and unfortunately too common. Well, more common than it should be. “

“What?”

“No doubt you had not heard, but a few months before the great war a chunk of said metal had fallen just outside the city. The explosion took many lives, but it was covered up under the guise of a minotaur attack. No pony wanted to hear that the sky was falling in between hostile raids. So Mr Haygas reported lies as reporters are wont to do-”

“Mr. New Haygas?” There was no way it could be the same pony. New Haygas's voice was too damn amazing to be a ghouls, and there was no other way a pony could live that long.

“Mr Haygas.” The doctor corrected. “He was a DJ before the war, and his voice was famous. Since Dise came to be, many took up his mantle,” He stopped before staring at me quizzically, “You really know nothing about this area do you?” I shook my head slowly wishing I had a sweet clue about anything. Ever. “I guess it doesn't matter. What matters is getting you and your friends right as rain. Now about what Morowynd wanted you for...”

“What is number six?” It came to me in a flash; memories of the night before. I remember them saying that multiple times.

He swallowed for a second. “It's... a code. Code six stands for a life threatening injury that needs immediate attention. Now, are you going to let me give you caps or what?”

I'm listening.

“When you were out we weren't exactly sure if the drugs you took were going to kill you. So we may have done some tests on you when we had the chance.” I narrowed my eyes at him but gave him the chance to finish. If only because he did save Serenity's life. “Yeah. Sorry. Back where I come from there's a saying that: *time waits for nopony*. The tests were simple enough. It's just. You are very remarkable. There have been stories of ponies surviving exposure to starmetal for years, but all official records have them living three days tops. You're, well, the answer to a question.”

“Thanks... I guess.”

“And we've arranged for a hefty transfer of caps to your saddle bag for being a good sport about our totally unethical practises.” Right whatever. All I heard in that sentence was caps, everything else didn't

matter.

I shrugged up at the blue pony and tugged at the remaining binds. “You mind?”

“Oh yes. You'll want to see the filly.” I shot up again.

Serenity. Yes. I had to see her. And then make sure she had a home here. A place she would be safe from radiated water, crazy slavers, and exploding doors. So obviously a place not anywhere near me. As much as I liked the filly, my life was dangerous and getting worse all the time.

“Don't break anything else please.” He chuckled. “Ginger, please come in here.” What kind of name was Ginger for a pony?

It wasn't.

Ginger wasn't a pony.

He was something. Instead of walking on all fours it stood on two almost goat legs like a griffin, if a griffin had goat legs. Its massive upper body and chest towered over everypony else in the room, and he seemed to have almost no neck at all and a tiny head with two huge curving horns. Instead of forelegs it had, arms, I guess, ending with griffin like claws, except with three fingers and one thumb. His whole body was covered with thick brown fur. It glowered down on me, and me even I seemed small in compared to it.

“What the fuck!”

Minotaurs.

I had heard about them. Many times in fact. One time in verse. I had thought they were just another gang of ponies. Trying to claim their namesake. Of course, I was a complete idiot. If I would have thought, would have asked, would have anything I may have figured out the mystery much sooner.

Apparently, before the war Caledonia never actually fought Zebras. Instead, they fought a war by proxy against the Zebras' close allies known as the minotaurs. They were an illusive race that roamed the vast plains and deserts to the west destroying or conquering all they saw in a massive horde. No pony, or zebra (or buffalo, though to hear tell they tried their hardest) had ever succeeded in dealing with them before they started attacking Caledonia settlements. As the war pushed forth, the Zebras gave their allies megaspell technology, just as Equestria gave Caledonia. When Roam and Canterlot went up in green flames and pink smoke, Caledonia and the minotaurs too joined in the apocalypse.

After the war was different though, the Minotaurs had never stayed in one place for long, so the end of the world did not affect them as much. They still roamed the West, though in smaller numbers, and have been harassing NCA settlements. There was a war, or something.

I'll be honest I started to doze off as the doctor got to this part of the lesson. Yes, lesson. He sat me down for a half hour long lesson about minotaurs before he let me see Serenity. Because apparently I was supposed to know and care about this stuff. Frankly, It really didn't matter to me if they found a way around memory orbs two hundred years ago.

The only part that mattered was the fact they had regrouped. And were massed at the Canyon Ridge Bridge, and controlling everything west of it, trading insults with the NCA. Apparently, they wanted to destroy Dise for reasons that made no sense. Whatever the matter they were apparently a threat to the city, and the only reason the city's waring factions hadn't torn each other completely apart.

“Thanks...” I mumbled rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. “Serenity?”

He perked up, his black and red mane nearly standing on end, “Yes.” He motioned for Ginger to open the tent flap revealing The Watchers camp in twilight. “Huh. It was bright when I came in here.”

I groaned and rose to my feet. It still would have been light out if he didn't stop every three minutes to recall a memory of his childhood. If you wished it, I could detail his entire foalhood. Not that I really desired to go through that again.

Ginger walked in front of us with slow unsteady movement. Like he was about to fall over with each step. Wherever he went ponies scattered. Subtly though, like rats scurrying away from being stomped, not running and screaming like fillies from a monster. Still, you could see how it annoyed him. Even if he never spoke. “A refugee from a minotaur camp.” The red and black maned doctor explained, “He has vowed never to speak until his former comrades leave the Caledonian wasteland. Unfortunately no one else would take him in out of fear. So we did”

“How nice.” I remarked blandly. It was getting to be a struggle just listening to what he said after that lecture, nevertheless caring. So instead I gazed upon the watcher camp.

It was. Not what I had expected. When Serenity excitedly explained them as healers, and helpers at all I was expecting grand hospital able to fit thousands of ponies. What was there was a large flat area of the city quartered off and filled with tents. Hundreds upon hundreds of tents filled to the brim with ponies of questionable integrity, and health. The blue tarp tents almost looked like a sea, or at least what I pictured a sea looked like from what I have heard of them. The largest and grandest seemed to line along the walls of the compound and seemed to be saved for the critically injured, or as housing for the doctors and nurses.

“So.” I said slowly, fearing another verbal tirade as I walked beside the doctor, “This is The Watchers.”

“Awe. Not always what ponies expect. We've grown a lot in the last few years. It was only this year, actually, that we started sending out caravans to tribal villages in the north-eastern hill-lands. It has not gone as we would have liked,” his voiced trailed off in reminiscence, “but the Watcher does as the Watcher wills.”

“Huh.” Religion. Was this really a conversation I wanted to have with a pony that potentially had storage lockers full of poisons. Apparently it was, as my stupid mouth kept moving before I had a chance to, ya know, think. “It's a religion now?”

He chuckled a bit before responding, and seemed to slow down as he led me through the maze of tents, “It is to some. We have no books, or sheets of prayers, or physical deities to dote upon, but it is something.” He gazed upwards at the clouded sky. I was surprised he didn't not run into anypony the way he wasn't looking where he was going. Ginger may have had something to do with that though. “We believe that we were put on the earth for a reason. That the wasteland had purpose, and that somewhere we are being watched by something greater than our understanding. Something that wants us to *do better*. To *be better*. So that's what we do.” Well that explains the name. Shame, I was hoping for something more mysterious.

“But I have talked too much,” Ya think?

We stopped suddenly at an identical looking blue tent to the thousands of others. The flaps were closed but inside I saw like peeking through. “We're here.” Serenity. Inside. It was just about time for a sappy reunion. I could hear the violins already.

“Hey.” I said as the doctor and his Minotaur friend had already started to walk away. But he turned and gave me a impartial gaze with his dark eyes. “Who are you?” Maybe I should have asked that earlier when we first met, but hindsight is 20/20.

“Clean Cutt. I am the founder, and leader of the Watchers.” And then he trotted off into the sunset without a hint of irony.

Whatever.

With a fluttering in my chest I opened the flap expecting the worst after what I put her through.

“HIRED!” She had her forearms wrapped around my neck as I felt warmth rising to my cheeks. “I missed you.” How long had I been out? Another question I should have asked but did not. She pulled back from the hug; her grey eyes regarded me with warmth I did not deserve. “You Saved me! Again!” She giggled so much I had to wonder if she was on pain medication. But when I looked at where the wound was on her chest, it seemed all but healed with only a faint scar remaining.

Gently I placed her back on her bed as she kept talking. “Three times now. *Three!* I need to start keeping track.”

“Serenity, I-”

“I was hoping when they fixed me up they'd add some robotic parts. Like a heart! Then I'd be a cyborg. Like you! Wouldn't that scare the pants off any raider?”

“Serenity, li-”

“They didn't though. It's a real shame as that would have been *awesome*, so very awesome I stayed awake all last night thinking about it,” Well that explained it. I made a mental note to keep my fillies rested from then on, “Well, mostly I stayed up hoping you wouldn't be mad at me-”

“Mad at you?” I had to stop there. Why in Equestria would she think that? It was impossible for me to be mad at a filly for more than five minutes, and trust me, I have tried. “No, Serenity, I'm not mad.”

“Good. Once they give me a clean bill'o'health, we can leave and find a job with-” Perhaps I should have shared my plans. Told her why we came to the Watchers. To find her a home. So now it came time to break it to her, but I couldn't. The words caught in my throat, and my intestines twisted themselves into knots.

“You're staying.”

She looked at me. I could taste the tension in the air.

“W-what. You don't like me?” I couldn't bear to look her in the eyes. This was... it was not supposed to be this difficult. She was suppose to hate me or dislike me. I sold her to raiders. For like thirty seconds...

“No. I like you.” Words stuck in my throat. Again. Why couldn't I channel Smooth Tongue just for a minute. “It's that. Look at you.” She stared down at her healing body, and around at the medical tent she had claimed as her temporary home. “It's not safe with me. You'll get hurt. You'll die.”

“With you protecting me?” She said flipping her mane and dismissing my worries, “Never.”

“You just got hurt.” Or did she really forget what happened just days ago. “Nearly died.”

“B-but. That was just a one time th-”

“And when you nearly drowned at the stable.”

“Well.” Serenity stopped her muzzle scrunching up trying to think. “y-you saved me. Both times.”

“Barely.” I sighed nuzzling her neck softly, “I'm not invincible. Or infallible.” No shit. Yeah it was obvious, but I had to stop her before she started treating me like a hero. “I can try my hardest. But, shit happens. I can't risk you dying.” Why did I have to be so sappy?

Emotions and I were... not close. I could kick down a raider without fear, but I didn't know what to do when tears started to form in my eyes. I couldn't kick tears no more than I could shoot my feelings. So I did what I always did and choked them back.

“I.” She started and stopped for a second her grey eyes welling with tears. It was getting too much. “I want to be with you. I. I mean, I liked the Watchers. B-but. They never cared. None of them would have done half a what you did.” I felt a blast of warmth as she licked my cheek.

“I'm not a good pony.” Not for the longest time at least. I worked for bad ponies and did bad things. Constantly, and I had no intention of stopping.

“No.” At least she knew that. “B-but you aren't bad. You're...” Her muzzle scrunched up again.

“...honest. I think. You do your... job. But you never lie about what you're doing... when the jobs done and you're on your own. You always do the right thing.” A few times did not mean always. I promised myself to stay true to my contracts, but I didn't always do the right thing when I was away from them.

“I. It's still too dangerous.”

“I'm a *big pony*. I can decide that!”

Silence.

“Okay.” I broke the silence, and with a word I turned her expression from misery to mirth. “But.” I added before I could be bombarded with '*ohmigoshohmigoshohmigosh*' “You can't decide now. Think about the dangers. Then give me your answer.”

“I alre-”

“No.” I cut her off. “You haven't. When they say you are healthy enough to leave, then tell me.” She nodded sadly and curled herself into a ball unable to contain a yawn. “You need to sleep.”

That had gone not as well as I had hoped.

Turning I moved to leave back to my tent when I heard a small voice call out. “Hired. Could you. Sleep here?” I craned my head around and gave her my best smile.

After taking a few moments to move some junk off the floor before carefully lying down beside Serenity's bed. It was only a few seconds after closing my eyes that I felt something small and warm against my chest. I really didn't understand this filly. But that was okay. Sometimes you didn't have to know everything, you just had to know enough.

Wow.

That was deep. I'm impressed.

Being under medical sedation for a few days apparently made me more rested than I had thought. According to my pipbuck, I only napped for an hour before waking up to find Serenity snoring softly at my side. Sighing contentedly, I laid my head down and enjoyed the moments of peace. They were few enough. Of course, it didn't take long for my mind to wander and I started obsessing on how I planned to protect this little filly and still eek out a living. I couldn't stop doing the tough jobs, not when I had a promise to Wildfire I hadn't kept yet.

Depressing.

So instead I got to my feet, my metal leg humming ominously, before tugging the blanket over Serenity with my mouth. When I left the tent it there was darkness outside, well as dark as Dise ever got. Lights shined in all directions like a thousand stars had wandered too close. Looking up at the tall buildings

outside, I had to admit they're beautiful.

My gaze shot down when I heard screams.

I looked around at the sea of blue tarps. I know I heard screaming, but I saw nothing. I turned my head and saw somepony running away, their flank to me. Were they running away from me? I knew I was a cyborg technically, but I never expected I was scary enough to run away from.

So I turned on my radio, "...for the news!" Why did it seem whenever I turned on my radio the news was always on. *"Strange Reports from the Big 52 of what appears to be a pink ghost. More details as they become available. Well it seems two, and I use this term lightly, vigilantes have taken to duelling in the Dise streets at night. One calls herself the Batmare, while the other The Laughing Stallion. From eye witness reports, often they arrive at the scene of a crime scene at the same time and promptly forget to fight it in favour of themselves. I... There are no words. So here's some music."* Vigilantes. Right.

As I walked through the maze vainly trying to find the exit, I saw nearly no pony. Those that I did see took one look at me, and my leg, and quickly made themselves scarce. Only one pony stood to match my gaze and it was a cutiemark-less colt. He glared at me with something coming perilously close to loathing before a hoof appeared behind a tent flap and pulled him inside. Somehow, and I wasn't sure why, I did not feel welcome.

"Scarini' folk again, Hired? And here I thought detox would do you some good." Soaring out of the sky Flare landing in front of me looking... well looking really good. Don't get any ideas. I mean compared to his skinny twitching self from before, he looked healthy. His coat seemed bluer and fuller; his pink eyes were no longer blood shot and lacking in the bags as before. Hell, it even looked like somepony cleaned his mane.

"Looks like." I scanned the rows of tents seeing no pony.

"Yup, you're an idiot. Good things. Means I get to be Mr. Exposition and tell you shit like I'm an egghead or something." Flare had trick to speaking. He took a simple statement then added as many unnecessary words as possible. "Ya never heard of 'Celestia's Vision' have you? I don't suspect so, what with you not knowing much of anything, but they don't like cyborgs." I had heard of Celestia's vision, though I couldn't recall from where.

And I took offence to the term cyborg. I mean, I was, technically, one, but it still felt like a word reserved for lunatics what lost their soul. As far as I knew my soul was still intact. Then again the stigma of cyborgs losing their soul might be why these 'Celestia's Vision' whatever's did not look kindly on us limply-challenged.

"And." Oh, Flare was still talking. A look of disdain masked my surprise. "Them folk actually got their start in the Watchers here, so most folk here either are a part of them or agree with'em. And that means that they don't like the looks a you."

"You know this how?"

"Lived in Dise all my life, obviously. Only place the Remnants have a base after we got kicked out of the sky and what-have you. I wasn't no head commander or nothin', but everpony knows the basic run down of who does what and why." As much as it loathed me to hear yet another lecture, I wouldn't mind learning a few things. If Lucky wasn't pulling my tail, it was a dangerous city if you didn't know who ran it.

"Lets get out of here." The tension in the air was getting too thick. It felt like a thousand eyes were boring through my hide as we left.

“Fear.”

We trotted side by side through the streets of Dise moving towards the centre fountain. “Every pony here is 'fraid.” He flapped his wings for a second so he could gesture dramatically with his hooves as the plethora of ponies what swarmed the streets. “Ever since them NCA and Minotaurs, Dise has been afraid. Protests every other night, and when the Galicians send their ponitrons against them, they become riots. Mustangs fighting The House for control of the power-plant. I don't know what Molly and the Baises are doin' but it ain't good.”

“They the four gangs you said?” He nodded. Four gangs of Dise each trying to vie for power and control. Not counting the Watchers, Minotaurs, NCA, or Steel Rangers.

“Yeah.” He twirled around perching on one of the benches encircling the massive water fountain that acted as the city centre. “It's gettin' worse an worse. Rumours of a full-out gang war in the streets. Minotaur attacks, fears that the NCA will try to annex the city.” He reared up dramatically mimicking the statue of the pony behind him. He would have done a better job if he had no wings. “Soon the streets will burn, or something. Mark mah words. It wasn't no mistake I moved outta the city... though the drugs weren't part of the plan.”

His faced reddened as he continued, “But that's life. Anyway where was I? Oh yeah! Fear or something. Anyway ponies here like to drink and gamble to forget their woes for a night. Lets go to The Moon!” I knew that to be a casino. Sounded like a plan.

Before that I had to get a better layout of the city. The fountain did a good impression of a compass with four large streets pointing out in the applicable directions. North and south I already knew. Hotels to the north, hotels, the Watchers, and a jumbled mass of buildings to the south. So instead I looked down the western most street there was. Well nothing. It ended abruptly with the Dise wall cutting a building in half. Right. No way that's going to end up being important.

To the east there was a jumble of ponies getting thicker the further east it went. “What’s over there?”

“Huh. Oh, you know, houses and merchants and stuff. Anypony what doesn’t have enough friends or caps to live in the Cross,” The Cross I am guessing was what Dise called the four intersecting streets. At least it was well set up in that respect, four streets cut the majority of the city into four blocks. Each block owned by a different gang. Had to wonder who set that up. “Well they go there and live ina hut. Worst part of town if you don't count Parasite Mount or Eastside outside the city. Still, best place to shop, hardly ever overpriced.” He shrugged flapping over my head, “To the Moooooooon!” He rose dramatically before diving back and landing gently beside me.

Damn, I wanted wings.

“Why The Moon?” I asked keeping my head low as we started down the street. It wasn't like we were going to get lost with the huge water show constantly playing in front of it.

“It's the best fuckin' one. Sure The Alehouse has their little fight, but at The Moon everything is for sale.” Sounded like a good marketing strategy. Maybe. I honestly have no idea what a marketing strategy is. “No drugs for me though. I can resist. Just got clean for fuck’s sake, so don't go thinking that, but they got whores.” Heat rushed to my face as he winked at me. I just kept my head low and kept walking and prayed it was too dark out to see me blush. “Stallions... well, Mares for yo-” Wait, what?

“Wait, what.” I skidded to a stop. Mares? Wait. Did he really think I was a fillyfooler? Why the hell did everypony think that?

“Huh...” He stopped, looking embarrassed himself, “W-well, I thought. I mean the way you've been

looking at the mares round here-" I was not! Dirty lying liar. "It don't matter. Stallions, like I said, though ain't so many."

I ignored him and kept walking doing my best to memorize the street.

"We're here."

I looked up sharply to see a pretty, dolled-up mare smiling at me. Oh Celestia, why? She winked seductively, and I felt blood rush to my cheeks all over again. Behind me, I heard that blue bastard laughing at me. Growling, I pushed passed the whore as she said, "You like it rough? So do I." I never answered and never bothered to look back at the water show. I resisted the urge to kick the door down.

"Hey there, doll," A handsome Stallion said behind his desk, "Welcome to The Moon. Where the naughty come to get punished," I could not have gotten more red. "We'll have to take your we-" It took me all of two seconds to unstrap my battle-saddle and dump it on his desk. I didn't really care; I just needed a drink.

"Don't get so worked up." Flare nickered beside me flapping his wings, "You're always so uptight. Take a load off." He opened the door from the entrance lobby, into the atrium. "This is the Moon."

The whole floor seemed dark enough to give the illusion of nighttime but still bright enough to see everything. Most of that light came from a fake half-moon hanging from the ceiling overlooking the game floor. Two dozen tables of games I had never heard of and countless slot machines were spread out evenly across the purple carpeted floor. Gamblers rolled dice and flipped cards as serving mares in skimpy outfit strutted about, their flanks swaying as they walked. On the far wall was a simple stage with a single pool. I looked over just in time for music to start blaring and a Mare to come out dancing an...oh. Um. Wow.

"Drink."

"Yeah yeah." He hovered off to a nearby counter. From the vague memories of the Bridle hope I knew what this was all about. Before we could play and drink we needed casino chips. Gamble with those and trade them for drinks. Or other things here I guess.

I followed after him and got a lovely set of multicolour chips. Obviously, I kept enough in my saddle bags for later, I wasn't stupid enough to gamble all my caps away. "You ever play craps before?" I shook my head. "Hah, it's easy."

After that point things got blurry. I remember a pretty mare getting me shots of whiskey. And the more. And then more. After that there was this vague sense of warm happiness. Scenes of gambling and caps. Kisses, mare and stallions. Someone telling me I needed to learn how to hold my liquor. The bottom of a toilet.

I awoke slowly cursing at everything I could think of. My head pounded like a jackhammer, and my stomach heaved when I tried to move. Something smelled like vomit and piss. It made my head hurt more. Groaning I opened my eyes. Why the fuck did I have to drink so much? Looking at the bed, I was happy to see at least this time I didn't wake up in some strange mare's bed.

I swear, I'm not a fillyfooler. Shut up.

"Hello." I didn't recognize the voice. Oh fuck.

I drew my eyes to the doorway where a large red stallion was grinning at me from behind a pistol. "Smells like you had a fun time. I-"

"Piss off." I burred my head into my pillow. "Your voice hurts." He snorted laughter.

“Clean yourself up.” Fuck off. Does nopony get the message? “You spent too much last night.” Ya think? I mentally added a note that red ponies like to state the obvious. “You owe us two thousand caps.” I...wait. “You're broke. Even with the weapons we took. Until then, you work for us.”

Like hell I was! I rolled off the bed ignoring the urge to puke and die of a headache. Only to fall face first. Blinking I realized my leg was deactivated. The red fucker was still laughing at me.

“Congratulations. You're officially a Mustang.”

Footnote: Level Up!

Skill Note: Barter: 25

((First off I have to thank Kkat for creating this world I am abusing for fun and profit. And to my Editor ErrantIndy for being awesome and making this not, you know, suck. As well as to the folks at the FO:E Proto document, who are always there for support))

Chapter 7: Made Mare

“A gentleman always has a flower handy to drop on an opponent's grave. “

I smashed his head against the table.

Blood seeped from just above his forehead and pooled on the surface of the table before I pulled him back up. He was tougher than most. The last two brought into 'The Room' had taken one look at me and squealed like a stuck mole rat. The buck glared at me with his deep red eyes and didn't say a word.

“Just tell us who you're working with.” The large red pony that 'recruited' me into his gang four days earlier smiled at the other end of the table. He'd do that for the stubborn ones. Smile and let me do the hitting. I think he liked The Room more than was healthy. “And you get to go.”

“Fuck yo-” My hoof struck into his stomach. Gasping, he held his stomach, and his head slumped back into his pool of blood. “you.” He gurgled, almost sounding like he was drowning. I rolled my eyes and looked away from the sorry sight. Doing shit like this made my stomach turn, at least it had the first time. Now I really didn't care.

“Listen. My friend here,” he waved a hoof at me before flicking his pitch black mane out of his eyes, “likes to hurt ponies. Not much for words, but the hurting part she gets, you see? This ain't no game.”

I stood as still as stone as the green stallion we were interrogating rose his head from the table and spat a glob of blood in front of the red pony. “Fuck you. I'm an NCA Solider and a citizen of Flankyard. Do you have any idea who you're fucking with?”

“Do you?” The large red pony could not hold back his glee as a smile formed on his face. “The NCA is toothless. They exist because Dise hasn't told them to fuck off yet. Do you have any idea how many NCA fools are buried in unmarked graves? And yet, the mustangs survive.” He laughed heartily enough to send visible shivers down the green stallions spine. “Show our guest what we think of the NCA.”

I clenched my teeth on his mane and threw him from his chair, sending him sliding into the white wall. Quickly I spit out the hair still stuck on my mouth, bits of flesh clinging to their ends. I resisted the urge to scrap my tongue with my hoof: The bits of hair I couldn't spit out were itchy and annoying but my boss hated when I broke my character. Finally I turned back to the pathetic green pony now bleeding heavily from the back of his head starting to dye his mane red.

“Will you speak now?”

The green stallion rose his head and looked up at me with glassy fear-filled eyes. I met them with my usual stoney look and he shuddered. “Y-you bastard. You and your fucking augmented, psycho, cyborg freak,” How charming. I made sure to remember that in case he survived this encounter. “Fine... fuck it. Fuck them, I'll tell you, just tell your dog to heel.” Now I was a augmented, psycho, cyborg dog. He really should keep his story straight.

Respectfully I backed up to my “masters” side as the green pony spilled the beans. Apparently him and four other ponies had come from the university (I don't quite know what a university is but it seemed to be key) in Flankyard and had developed a strategy to beat blackjack; Just by counting cards and some fancy mathematics. It was a good plan, a solid plan. Until they got caught, and when you get caught cheating in Dise (or when somepony thinks you are cheating) you usually are never seen again. Frankly the whole idea was crazy.

The house *always* wins.

“These are the names and profiles of the group,” red pony was saying to one of the guards of 'The Room'. “Send them to every casino in Dise, and might as well tell those fuckers at the Death Clock about them too.” He turned and grinned at me, “And House says we never do nothin' good.”

“You don't.” I helpfully pointed out.

“*We* don't.” he placed his hoof on my shoulder, “You're a Mustang. Might as well be proud of it.”

I shrugged him off. “You're an ass, Mayhem.”

“You could at least pretend to enjoy your work.”

“No. I couldn't.”

With a deep chested sigh Mayhem led me down the white hallway. It was a simple hallway that seemed almost too long and too bright, with only two doors on either end. This was intentional. Some ponies have been known to break down halfway through the hallway and confess their crimes before ever reaching 'The Room'. It was designed to intimidate, and it did it's job well. It was their own fault though. Trying to cheat the house was a good way to get a bullet in the brain.

“You're more fun when you're drunk.” Mayhem said leading me into the roomy cargo elevator.

“Fuck off.” Just thinking about that night made my head pound, and it didn't help that Serenity and Flare thought it funny to bring it up at every possible opportunity. If that damnable blue pegasus was to be believed, I'd hired a private dancer just to make her hoof wrestle me, I bought rounds of drink and dash for everypony in the casino, stolen a pit bosses gun and accidentally shot a hooker in the flank with it, and got on stage and danced. I didn't believe half of it, but my hazy memory of the night didn't give me good standing to argue.

Mayhem chuckled as the door slid shut. “You've got the next few hours off. Then boss wants you at the door to send away the street rats.” He said as the elevator started to jerk upwards.

How I hated elevators, they always made my stomach turn... at least the ones in the Moon did. I have never been in an elevator before and had originally thought them magic. Mayhem said something about weights and counter weights, but I was still fairly sure it was magic.

“And Serenity?”

“I guess your whelp can have some time off.” he shrugged.

“Call her that again.” I said as the machine jerked to a stop. “I'll kill you.”

“I only do it 'cause I know how it brings a smile to your face.” The door swung open and I briskly stepped out, and quickly slammed it on his smarmy face. The front of the door was adorned with the symbol of a pony in a wheelchair, with a sign claiming it was out of order. Sighing I walked past the bathrooms, and down the small hall into the casino floor.

The floor was just as dazzling as it had been the first time I saw it. Only now the large fake moon looked less sparkling and more chipped and cracked. The games on the floor with their bright lights now made me feel guilty instead of excited. And the dancer on the stage seemed a lot less sexy now that I knew her name was Mayflower, and was only working there to pay for her dash habit.

I blame Flare. That ass.

“Hey baby,” A skimpy mare sauntered up to me, “Do you want to-oh. It's you.” her voice dropped suddenly from its sultry tone. “Done with the NCA nerd already?” She flipped her hair and grinned, “hard to believe the gall of some'a them folk. Not hard ta believe you made'em crack though.”

“Thanks.” I mumbled my eyes searching through the casino floor. Reluctantly I'd gotten Mayhem to agree to let Serenity work, but only after Serenity had forced me to agree to let Mayhem let her work. Or something. I didn't want her anywhere near a place like this, and for good reason. But she was nothing if not stubborn. “Have you seen-”

“High rollers blackjack.” The mare said at once smiling at me, “So you got some time off? Why not get a drink with me, I'm a lot more... interesting than a filly.” Sighing, I turned my head to the sweet girl, knowing she was just looking to make some extra money.

“No.”

I trotted my way into the din that was the casino floor. Somehow It seemed they made the rows of slot machines and tables confusing on purpose. Had I not been forced to walk around glaring at ponies every day it would have taken me forever to find the high-rollers tables, even considering it was on an elevated platform. I was nearly stopped on the stairs up until the guard recognized my metal leg and let me through.

Serenity was easy to find after that. She was cheerfully lifting up a drink from the tray balanced on her back, [img][img]and placing it telekinetically in front of a rather serious looking player. Like everything else, she was determined to do her job with a smile.

I trotted up just to hear an old mustachioed stallion say, “Hey, pretty filly,” he stroked back his sweat soaked grey mane. “How much for a ni-”

That was not going to happen.

“She's not for sale.” Both filly and old man turned to look at me. Serenity squealed in delight and quickly hopped onto my back, the tray on her back clanging to the floor. The old stallion just laughed at me.

“Listen, this is The Moon. Everything is for sale. Even you if I wanted.” He slammed his hoof on the table for effect, doing little more than drawing attention to us. Great, just what I needed. “Now hand her over. Do you know who I am I-”

“I said: No.” I repeated edging ever closer to the old stallion. More ponies turned and watched, but no pony said a word. I could taste the tension in the air, and the slight glow on his horn made my shoulder burn.

“Get out of my way you little bitch an-” With a less than gentle shove I sent his head into the blackjack stable. At the impact his head snapped back sending him sprawling off his chair onto his rump, blood dripping down around his horn. “W-w-w-what?”

“I said.” I said as I moved over his limp body, eyes burning red hot. “She. Is. Not. For. Sale.” I pressed my metal leg against his shoulder, pinning him to the ground, “Got it?” He nodded dumbly so I took the time to turn away, wondering what could make ponies so stupid.

Quickly I left the scene, hoping that Mayhem wasn't going to add more caps to my already expensive debt, but, dammit, some ponies needed to be taught manners. The crowd that had formed has already dispersed I saw as I looked back, and everypony went back to gambling. It wasn't that unusual in The Moon. Rude customers get a smack to smarten them up, cheating customers got dragged to ‘The Room’, and good customers got taken to the back for a private dance; Most were willing to risk the bad for that chance, so every pony won.

Except for me, because I wanted nothing to do with it.

“You didn't have to hit him.” Serenity sighed placing her fore hooves on top of my head, messing up my already messy mane.

“You're right.”

She peered over my head looking at me upside down with stern grey eyes. “Soooo. Why did'ya?”

“He pissed me off.” Sighing she returned to curling up in my back, pouting no doubt. I weaved my way back through the half filled maze of slots, and to the bar. The bartender recognized me right away and magically held up a bottle of apple whiskey and waved it in my general direction. Groaning I waved it away with my metal hoof. “You're an ass.”

“I thought you liked whiskey.” Oh, how I loved whiskey, and how I hated it.

“Two Sparkle Colas.” I sighed resting my head on the counter as the bartender chuckled.

“Two, you must be real thirsty.” he said just as Serenity popped up on my back and rested her forelegs on my head. Again. “Oh hey there, Serenity. Forget how to walk again?” She giggled and floated one of the sparkle coals over in a pink glow. My shoulder burned slightly, but honestly ever since entering Dise it had been burning non-stop. You couldn't go three steps without running into a unicorn. Luckily, it seemed the more magic around the duller the burning would get. Really, you'd think it would be the opposite, but what did I know?

I gulped back the carrot soda in the single gulp, letting the bottle drop the counter with a ting. Honestly, I wished it was whiskey, but Serenity would have given me one of her looks. Somehow she had a way of making me feel guilty over the most absurd things. Like beating up perverted creepy old men. Maybe it wasn't so bad, helped wane me off the stupider choices I was wont to make.

“Get up, Hired.”

Groaning, I lifted my head and turned to see Mayhem leaning on a nearby railing his legs crossed casually. “Boss wants to see you.” Boss? He was the boss. He told all the pit bosses what to do and only answered to Roy Mustang hims-... oh. Serious? Roy wanted to see me. There had to be some mistake.

“That must be a mistake.” I remarked, turning smoothly to the red stallion.

“I said the same thing, believe me. Boss don't usually like anypony, and lately he ain't seen nopony but me and his mares.” Note the plural. The only thing I knew about him came from the radio, and none of it was good. Apparently he was involved with a raid on the local power-station (don't ask what fuelled the station, I hadn't a clue. Magic I guessed), and later joined forces with the Minotaurs. Who were an equally nasty piece of work.

He was also my boss, so I was obliged to abide by his whims.

“Right. So I don't get a break?” I met his unflinching red eyes for a second before he laughed.

“No. Clean yourself up first... and wash your tail.” My tail was fine, I swished it back and forth to prove that point, “When was the last time you brushed it?” Never. That was a dumb question.

“Sometimes I brush it when she sleeps~” I glared at Serenity as she giggled on my back, suspecting she wasn't joking at all. She opened her mouth as if to continue her joke when somepony down the bar cut her off.

“Turn it up!” I turned to see a shocked little grey mare staring at the radio playing Mr New Haygas' show. Unsurprising, as it was also the only show. What was surprising was that Mr New Haygas didn't seem... his usual self.

“... you heard that right everypony. Yesterday- a day that will live in infamy- the NCA South Canyon Base was suddenly and deliberately attacked. It's too soon to say conclusively, but it appears the Minotaurs had a bale-fire bomb planted in the catacombs beneath the base...” He paused, as if not

actually believing it, *“It is unknown how many survived the attack, but what is known at this time, is that without a doubt we are seeing the start of another bloody chapter in pony history. May Celestia and Luna above, guide us.”*

“What the...” My mind was swimming. A bale fire explosion. War. But what I thought most about was the Minotaurs, and their connection to the Mustangs. And to me, now. It seemed, without my knowledge or consent, I had declared war on the NCA. The only think I could think of, was a single word.

Survive.

“Ow,” I winced kicking my back-leg involuntarily. “Gentle.”

“Wimp, not my fault your tail is so tangled.” I turned to glare at Serenity as she gleefully brushed my tail silky smooth. She was clearly enjoying herself way to much, but it was too much of a hassle to do it myself... It's not my fault Celestia made me an earth pony. It made things difficult. Nothing I couldn't handle, at least when I had friends.

Dear Celestia: I'd officially become a cliché.

“This reminds me.” I turned my head to the window of our small dirty hotel room we called a home to see Flare float into our hotel room, landing with a flourish. “Of that night. You hired the bartender and got this brush-”

“Flare. Fillies are present.” Serenity just raised an eyebrow at me and giggled before running over to embrace the blue pegasus. Rolling my eyes I took a seat on the floor. “Did you need something?”

Flare didn't choose to answer my question, at least not before picking the small unicorn up, and doing a quick back flip much to her delight. “News of a sort. Figured I still owed you.” Damn straight. “It's serious though,” he said taking the time to ruffle up Serenity's mane. “Very serious. Like it's grade-A Celestia tier serious fucking business, so prepare yourself, this-”

“The attack on the NCA base.”

“You ruin everything!” Flare harrumphed, floating himself up so he could cross his forelegs at me, “Couldn't even let me have this one little things. Just once you know! Got a big whole dramatic thing planned and you go and ruin it by already knowing it. Now I need to think of something else exciting, oh I got it!”

“I'm on the edge. With excitement.” I intoned as dully as I inspected the wall paper. Once it had been white, with murals of Celestia and the Ministry Mares on it (from my understanding Dise was made for Equestrians looking to take a break from, you know, war) but has since yellowed and decayed, even stripping off at parts so I could see the rotting wood behind it.

“Somepony in this room might just get re-accepted into the Enclave. Well the Remnants. Honestly with the whole war thing going on in the north you'd think they'd change their name to something less.. less something. Way I hear it they're sending Raptors against anypony what used to be Enclave, and that puts a big ole target sign on us bu-” Celestia's Nephew, he just didn't shut up. What did I do to deserve this?

“I thought you quit.”

“I did! Well. I was forced to quit after this one time I blew up one of our basements due to the fact I may have been on an altered reality, but I still quit you see.” He made this explanation while flapping

his wings to allow him to simulate standing on the ceiling. Talking to Flare made me dizzy. “Not for a month though. Maybe less if the war turns out in force, but they wanna make sure I am clean before taking me back. Explosions and drugs don't mix they say.” His grin told me he thought differently.

“Oh, you can stay with us!?” Serenity chirped in. “Until you can join again. Hired's nice but she never tells me stories like you do.” Fillies are a fickle bunch. Also prone to putting me in awkward situations with annoying pegasi. Well, at least he did have some advantages, his story telling notwithstanding.

“Yeah sure. A real power trio.” I waved a hoof dismissively before stretching and returning to all fours, “Come on, Serenity. The boss is expecting me.”

“Mayhem can wait. He's all bark and no bite.” Flare said prompting me to give him a sly smile as Serenity hopped onto my back.

Opting to be mysterious instead of helpful I walked out the door and shut it behind me, hoping to leave Flare bewildered. If for no other reason than because I found it funny. That's a valid reason, right?

The hallway of our sixth floor room was... very bland. Maybe to contrast the excitement of the casino floor, I wasn't sure. The wall paper was plain white (or it was white, but had since turned yellow) with a bar horizontally across the centre with pictures of the different phases of the moon. A lovely aesthetic. At least I thought it was, and Serenity seemed to busy herself as we walked down the long hallway but counting the phases. So it was a win/win.

Blah blah blah. We walked and walked. Rode an elevator. Made some small talk. Honestly my mind was in a whole different place. For some reason my mind was flashing back to that *contract* Lucky gave me back in Timber after I kicked his ass out of the town. I was doing mental juggling trying to justify shirking the Mustangs if the war got started in earnest, on the off chance the NCA decided The Mustangs were too cozy with the Minotaurs. Argh. I tried to slam my head against the elevator door just as it slid open.

I hit the ground head first with a thud sending dull pain through my skull, neck... and my pride as Serenity giggled at me. “What're you doing?” Looking up I saw Mayhem's red eyes glaring down at me like I was an idiot. Groaning I jumped to my feet and shook the pain out of my head.

“Resting.”

Blinking for a second he turned away, “Why Boss wants you I'll never know. This way. Up the stairs.”

“Huh.” I looked around at the similar looking hallway, “Aren't we on the top floor?” Mayhem obviously thought that was a stupid question and just kept walking, so I had no choice but to follow him. The room he lead us to was just a bit remarkable in that upon opening the door, the only thing in it was a large spiral stair case with gold railing.

“His penthouse apartment is up these stairs. He said he needed to speak to you alone.” Mayhem sounded a bit insulted, so that made it all the sweeter.

When we reached the top I was a bit dumbstruck at the sheer extravagance. The entire top floor was set up so you see clear from one side to the other with nearly every outer wall covered in windows (which I made sure to avoid) . For lack of wanting to get into highly detailed metaphors describing the intricacies of the room that wont even come into effect I'll give you a short run down of the amenities in descending order of me giving a fuck: A large ballroom complete with crystal chandelier, a huge outdoor deck and patio with a large pool, a gilded telescope, a huge heart shaped bed sectioned off in the corner, an entire wall of swanky looking paintings, some sort of gold tub thingy (whoever built this place really liked gold), and a small (relatively speaking, as the place was fucking huge) hastily constructed wooden room with the words, “Bosses Office” painted on the front.

Hazarding a guess I walked up a set of red-carpeted stairs and gently tried to knock on the door. Only for it to swing wide open.

“Fuck took ya so long?” The pony was... not what I was expecting. A small, lithe royal blue unicorn was sitting on the cushion across from the door smirking with strangely white teeth. His black hair was cropped short, yet still managed to spike awkwardly, and his tail wasn't visible underneath the huge white fur coat he wore. “You fuckers know who I am. So when I come calling you get your rotten tail up here, capeesh?” I nodded dumbly as he waved a hoof over to a cushion across from him.

As I went to slide down, Serenity hoped gingerly off my back.

“The fuck is that? Did Mayhem not give ya the scoop, I said alone. Last I checked fillies are ponies too.” Sighing he levitated a bottle of apple whiskey over to himself, drinking straight from the bottle. “Whatever. She can stay 'long as she learns real quick how to shut the fuck up.” My shoulder burned, and I so much much wanted to relieve that burn by shoving it into this pony's smarmy face.

“Introduction time. Go.”

“Hired Gun.” He rolled his eyes at my name, even though he already knew it.

“Serenity!”

“Whatever. It doesn't matter who you are only that you work for me. Roy Mustang. Got it? And before you go asking any fucking stupid questions like 'what kind of pony name is Roy,' my mother called me Rollo, but I stopped going by that after I stopped being fat, got it? Any questions? Good. Now, I've got some problems. You're retarded I can see, so I won't hurt your tiny head. Suffice it to say, I need you for a job.”

“What's the-” I started to say before he cut me off.

“I'm getting to that part. Patience. Fuck it. Like talking to a foal.” Serenity giggled at that until I shot her a look and warped my foreleg around her drawing her close. “You've heard of the Baises, right?”

“Vaguely.”

“Course. Only two thin's ya gotta know. First; they run the Ale House, and two; they want to take over my assets.” He groaned and rose to his feet, seemingly only to stare out the window at the dark alley mysteriously. “They think we're weak. That we'll bow down and capitulate.” Captiu-wha? “Surrender that is. Well, we won't.”

“Are you?” I said with a sigh, lying down and resting my chin on my metal leg. He turned his head and raised an eyebrow, somehow not comprehending what I thought was obvious. “Are you weak?”

He said more in a defensive glare than he ever could have said with words. “No. Weaker, perhaps but the Mustangs are not weak. The raid on the Power-plant was a folly, but only because it failed.” I got the feeling he was trying to convince himself more than me. “But we will not fall, not to Molly.”

“Molly.”

“Leader of the Baises... you really don't know fucking shit, do you?” He turned back and took a seat, and didn't stop glaring at me until I stopped lying on the floor. Spoilsport. “She's a fucking liar and a cunt.” he sounded more like a spurned lover than a gang leader. “And she wants my casino, and my water.”

“Why her?”

“Because Mr House doesn't give a shit about anypony. Ain't good for no pony, but ain't bad neither. I attacked him directly, and his only response was to sneer and ignore me. The Galacians ain't much better. I've heard rumours of some pony trying to usurp me, and she's the only pony what can and would

bother'ta. Now stop asking so many fuckin' questions and listen like a good little filly." Urge to stomp into paste rising.

"Now here's what I need from you, so listen good." He slicked back his pitch black mane with a sly grin. "I need you to break into that cunt's casino, and get me the juice on whatever she's plannin." he rolled his eyes, "And before you ask any dumb as shit question I need those fucking plans to plan my counter attack, and if it comes down to it get the Galicians to assist. The Mustangs ain't without friends, ya hear?" He shook his hoof almost menacingly at me.

"What do I get?"

"The privilege of working for the fucking boss..." He rolled his eyes and causally strolled over to a small cabinet and levitating a large wooden box out before dropping it on the floor in front of me. "You'll get out of your debt by the end of the week, a job here if you want it, and this motherfucker." he levitated the lid off with an orange glow, revealing the inside.

I licked my lips at the sight.

That was a damn fine gun. A Battle saddle mounted .50 calibre semi-automatic anti-material rifle with what looked like a custom oversized magazine and auto ammo-changing attachment, all in a sleek dark grey skin. I cannot express in words how much I loved that gun (Which is a shame considering the format you are getting this information in), but if I could I most certainly use the adjectives: sexy, amazing, unbefuckingleivable, wing-boner inducing.

Of course there were so many problems with this request; the most important being: how the fuck was I, the monster mare from beyond the stars with the subtly of a jackhammer, supposed to sneak into the head office of one of the most important ponies in Dise. I say this now, but at the time it wasn't really that important because goddamn that gun. It was what every gun should aspire to be.

"I'll do it."

"Good." he smiled. "Now get the fuck out. And Tell Mayhem to bring me the girls. Need to relieve stress."

"That's a terrible plan."

Less then two hours after meeting with the rather incorrigible boss of the Mustangs, me, Serenity, and Flare were sitting on my raggedy bed.

"I mean shit, just a terrible plan." By the way Flare was flapping his wings I guessed he did not care for my plan. As he raged on I took the time to help the slowing peeling away wall paper by poking at it. "How do you plan to sneak through the fucking halls of the Ale House? Even if I could fly you on top, which by the way I can't, I ain't the Batmare." He groaned 'accidentally' smacking my hoof with his wing. "Even if I could I wouldn't. You may be obliged to make an enemy of the Baise's, but I am not so dense."

"You will." My lavender eyes shot up meeting his in a stern glare. He started to talk, but I'd had just about enough of that. "Because you owe me."

"For wha-"

"How much?" He raised and eyebrow as he slowly floated back to the floor. "Those drug dealers. How much did you owe?" I was taking a gamble, but a casino seemed an appropriate place for that.

"Fuck." He stomped his hoof ineffectively on the floor. "Okay so maybe I lied, maybe they weren't selling drugs cheap they just were pushing me for money. Okay. I saw a fucking opportunity, and I," he

lowered his eyes looking almost ashamed, “I took it. How the fuck did you know, debt ain't a thing that spreads around.” I saw him eyeing the open window, and just as he did a pink glow slammed it shut. Smiling, I gave Serenity a nod of approval.

“I didn't. Until now.”

As I gave him time to pick his jaw off the floor I quietly congratulated what had to have been my most clever moment in a long time. “Now you owe me. You owe Serenity. Almost killed her, so you owe.”

“And if I refuse, what? You'll kill me, is that it? I know what I did was wrong, so you're preaching to the choir,” He said backing up towards the window nonetheless. “I just wanted a new start. A new life. I didn't think anypony was going to get hurt. I never wanted nopony hurt, you gotta believe me. I just...” he grit his teeth and tried his hardest to burn a whole in the carpet with his gaze. “Fuck. Alright. You win.”

Was there ever any doubt?

He groaned and flopped onto the floor, which gave Serenity plenty of time to tackle him. The blow sent Flare stumbling to his side and Serenity into a giggling fit. Clearly she had already forgiven him. I couldn't help but smile as they wrestled on the floor. The epic battle of wills not ending until Flare had manage to deviously ensnare Serenity in one of his wings. The tickling of his feathers proved too much and she was forced to surrender in between fits of laughter.

I was reluctant to stop them, but we had work to do. I quickly grabbed the map Mayhem had given me after my meeting with the boss, and rolled it out on the floor between us. It was a highly detailed, if crumbling, map of the top few floors of the Ale House's third building. To be honest, I wasn't sure which of the three buildings Molly's office would even be in to pilfer the information the boss needed from, but this one was my best guess, if only because it was the building that once held the Casino's pre-war owner.

“Alright, so how are we going to die?” Flare said as Serenity scrambled out of the folds of his wing to look at the map too.

“This way.” I pointed out an overlarge vent that, for some inexplicable reason, connected the pre-war bosses office with the roof. Actually it wasn't that inexplicable, and it was the first thing I noticed when looking at the map. Honestly my best guess why that particular vent was oddly placed and oversized was not that the former owner wanted to be spied on, but as an easy escape route. It was simple to deduce. What with the war coming, and an easy escape to the Stable being a priority.

And Mayhem had told me all the hotels had secret escape routes.

“That could work... well if you were some other pony.” Flare rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Also I took offence to that. “Don't take offence. I'm just sayin' you're... well you're loud is all. And with that hoof of yours stamping all over the place in a metal vent, well you ain't gunna be very subtle. Folk will either figure out it's a spy, or think a Sonic Rainboom is invading their hotel.” Sonic-what now? I raised and eyebrow but gave up on asking, I figured it was a pegasus thing.

“Well I could try to...” Do... something. Quiet like.

“What about... um...” Flare furrowed his brow.

This was a terrible plan.

...

A really bad plan.

Fuck.

“I can help.”

Those three little words nearly threw me off my feet. Instead I just sorta stared wide eyed and bewildered at Serenity. How was she supposed to help? Unless she magically got a cutie-mark in infiltration I doubted she would be much use. But I let her speak her piece. Just in case I was wrong, and/or an idiot. Turns out both.

“How?”

“I uh. Know this spell.” She gulped a bit her cheeks reddening as she stared up at the ceiling. “Mister Morrowind taught me. It's um, well, I can turn sound off.” Off? Like a switch or something. “Do you remember the, um tunnels? With the drug dealers, and that awesome rocket launcher?” Me and Flare just nodded dumbly. “Well, I kind of used it there, cause rockets are loud when they explode, and I didn't want it to hurt my ears.”

Should I have noticed that? I remembered something about her being there, but... whatever. “Serenity. It's dangerous.” And stupid.

“It's okay!” She bounded up to me, “I won't ask for a gun or anything. I just wanna help cause I like to help, even if it's dangerous. I mean, everything is dangerous. I know ya wanna keep me safe and I like being safe, but you know I have to take risks sometimes or we'll never getta do anything. So com'on. Please? Pretty please?” Those eyes. No pony should be that cute. Argh. Puppy eyes are officially cheating.

“Fine.” Odds are currently, 9 to 1 that I regret my decision. Taking all bets.

Serenity squeed with delight and embraced me. From the burning in my shoulder I guessed she was magicking something. “Just this once.” I tried to say, except what came out was... uh... nothing. My mouth moved but no words came out. And Flare was laughing his flank off.

Yeah, yeah. Serenity was just showing off now.

Even still. I had to laugh. Just a little bit. And only because no pony could hear me anyway.

“How much longer do we gotta wait?” Serenity was driving me batty. All we had to do was sit on the bench watching The Moon's water show and wait for Flare to arrive with what we needed for our mission. Instead she got bored and now was running in circles around the bench complaining.

“Until he gets here.”

“That's a stupid answer.” She hopped her way onto the bench's backrest and balanced on two hooves. “He's slow. You'd think a Pegasus would be faster, you know. Not super slow. I'm bored. This should be exciting not boring.” Everypony I know talked too much. I didn't ask for this.

“Ooooh.” My head snapped at the strange voice to see a frail old unicorn way to close to me. I may have jumped. Just a little. I'd never seen so much grey on a pony before. His coat, his mane, his clothing, even his eyes were grey. Just looking at him made me feel old.

“What?” I said. With a glare of course.

“Interesting choice. Yes. Very interesting. I haven't seen a working series 19-B in Dise in years. Yes, yes. Reliable, but so very old. So many more styles to choose from, yes, yes.” Was he talking about my leg? Not even a hello first? How rude. “Ma'am you should think about upgrading. Yes yes. I would suggest perhaps a Cerberus Model. Yes it'd fit somepony of your... stature. Retractable claws for gripping, yes yes, and a optional shotgun. Though it works better with a full set, yes yes. A quick amputatio-”

“My legs are fine.” I shoved the old man away harshly with my perfectly fine cyber-leg. Just because it was old and a bit skeletal looking didn't mean I needed a replacement.

“Cerberus models are dumb.” Serenity said resting her forelegs on my head, and her hindlegs on the bench backrest. “All kick, but they break down. Everypony knows that. You shouldn't try to rip ponies off.” I looked around, and though ponies were numerous (many liked to stop and watch the water show) none were Flare to save me from.. from whatever was going on.

“Oh?” the old stallion wrinkled his already considerably wrinkled snout. “And what would be better little miss know it all?” I briefly weighed the morality of murdering obnoxious elders.

“The Ten-Oh-One, for starters.” The old stallion rolled his eyes. “Pssh. It's a million times more reliable. Whats the good'a having a shotgun strapped to your leg if you have to clean it every shot?”

“So what?” came the dreaded response. “The Ten-oh-One is sturdy but useless other than for walking, not to mention heavy,”

“Where have you been? The newest version is sleek, trim, and twenty percent lighter. House came out with it last week, and almost half of his guards are wearing that version. Cerberus is a joke. Everypony knows that, at least anypony with a brain. Guess that don't mean you.” For some reason I felt this unnatural urge to chide Serenity for being rude, but I couldn't follow through. If only because I was far ruder far more often.

“What're we arguing about?” Flare!

Thank Celestia -- it was Flare floating above us a look of bemusement. “Save me.” I mouthed to flare as the two continued to bicker about wires or something. He laughed and did a quick flip before landing in front of us.

“Look at the time,” I quickly jumped to my feet pulling Serenity onto my back. “Lets go.” Before either of them could get off another word, I followed Flare.

He fluttered off just ahead of us as he lead us down a small alley way beside The Moon. I couldn't help but notice the difference between the outer facade of The Moon and the dusty dirty side walls that looked almost indistinguishable from the abandoned four story building on the other side of the alley.

“How did you convince them?” I asked, keeping my voice low. I was more than certain undesirable ponies hung out in the back alleys behind the Strip's casinos. I kept my eyes to the sky at the dark cloud layer burning red as the sun began to set.

Flare landed in front of me before turning into a long empty street. Once upon a time, I was sure it had been a busy pre-war street, but now it was trash. A backwater street in a city where only the Strip mattered. Some buildings had stood strong, while others had collapsed into heaps or fallen into the street filling it with rubble. They said Dise had never been directly hit by a Megaspell, but looking at the tumbled down backstreet it was hard to believe. As pretty as the main street of the city was, this street looked no better than Parasite Mound.

“I asked nicely.” Flare floated down the street.

“And the Finishers just let you borrow it?”

“Nope.” He grinned turning and leaning on the Sky-Carriage. “They let you borrow it. Heard from Screenshot: Photo feels guilty for what happened to Serenity. Guilty! A weak back for a gang leader if you ask me, but what other gang is like The Finishers? They got a shtick and stick to it.” He tapped the wall of the carriage with his hoof, “so I ain't complainin'.”

“Well,” I said, trotting over to the back of the carriage and helping Serenity inside, “I'll have to thank

them.” Serenity looked around the cart nervously as I turned back to Flare. “You can do this?” Before he’d said he wouldn’t be able to carry me in it. Or was it that it would be too slow? Either way I wanted to make sure so as not to fall and die to our deaths.

“Yeah, no worries. I totally got this.” he lowered his body as if ready to spring out at me, “I’m good. You’ll see. Smoothest ride ya ever get, you can count on it.” I’d rather not ride at all, and didn’t plan to after this adventure. Not that I was afraid. No-sirree. I wasn’t afraid of nothing...

Even if I was afraid, which I wasn’t, Flare pushed me into the cart before I had a chance to say anything. It seemed as almost as soon as the back panel snapped up and locked (to keep us from rolling off). With a jolt that shook me off my feet and nearly into Serenity, who of course giggled, we were off. I could already feel that sinking sensation as my stomach tied itself in knots.

Turning to the open back of the transport, I saw the ground. I knew the plan was to fly high into the clouds so we could fly from west side of the main street where The Moon was, to the east where The Alehouse stood, but I was not prepared for the way the ground grew smaller and smaller, and the buildings shrank beneath us. I tore my eyes away and covered them with my good foreleg (accidentally whacking myself with my pipbuck). All that open space. How easy would it be just to fall. I hated falling.

I could feel Serenity nudging me with her nose. Quickly I moved my leg back to the floor, and stared at the front wall of the cart. I couldn’t bear to show weakness. Again. Dammit. “Are you okay?” She moved closer, trying to comfort me, I was sure. Instead it was all I could do not to jolt away from her. “You’re not gunna fall, don’t worry. Flare will keep us safe... Hired?”

“Sorry,” I mumbled not able to look her in the eyes. Fuck heights.

“Are you afraid of heights?” No. I was afraid of falling.

“No.” I said, “Just. I fell once. Off a cliff. A long time ago.” I didn’t actually remember the fall. Or the landing. Wildfire said I fell from my guardpost back in Marefort. “Nearly died.” It was... not a pleasant memory for a lot of reasons. And whenever I looked down that’s all I could think of. “Seeing the ground like that. Just...”

In Marefort, I’d got over my fear of that cliff, so long as I never looked straight down, because I was there every day. This was different though. Nothing between me and the sky but a thin sheet of wood. And Serenity was there in the cart with me, and she reminded me so much of that charcoal grey filly.

Stupid, weak Silver. Get over it. *Survive.*

So I clicked on my radio instead. It helped me not think about falling. It was hard with the way my stomach twisted as Flare turned, but the radio was depressing enough to counter it. “*Reports are still coming in hot and sketchy about the bombing yesterday. So far the NCA has reported less than two hundred casualties including thirty members of The Watchers who had a medical camp set up in the base. However we have reports from anonymous individuals who place the number at over three hundred and fifty. A huge blow to the NCA regardless of the actual figures... Well that's enough depressing news. Onto something heartwarming, it seems a Raider gang that had been pestering caravans in the north-east has suddenly vanished. Multiple witness' have reported a Mare and a filly walking away from a known raider base shortly before the Raider gang vanished. Keep up the good work, gals. Onto the music, now with twenty percent more repetitiveness.*”

I rested my head as a familiar Sweetie Belle song poured out of my pipbuck, my mind going back to a raider I’d met weeks earlier.

“We're here~,” Serenity said a little while later, her head peering out over the back panel. Reluctantly and at Serenity's behest I looked out, and down at the top of one of the Ale House's three buildings. Gulping I quickly pulled my head back inside. Time to put my stupid plan to the test.

“Wait here,” I commanded Flare. We had waited until it had become full dark before truly descending and landing on the roof.

“Fine by me. Have fun storming the castle.” I rolled my eyes as I helped Serenity down from the cart, my fake leg creaking noisily. I really hoped Serenity could do that spell. Flare just watched, leaning on the cart.

“If anypony shows up, run.” His smile said he had already planned that. “Then come back. Later. We'll hide.” After I got a nod, me and Serenity were off.

The round roof had a series of vents sticking off the top, all around the relativity raised platform (with a huge letter 'V' tattooed on it) we had landed on. The one we were looking for was kind of obvious as that it was larger than the rest by miles (No pony could fit in a real air vent unless they were a foal, and maybe not even then) and when I kicked the metal door open it had sloping set of stairs. I guess my theory was right.

Nodding, I let Serenity go first, and, reliably as my metal hoof hit the metal steps, there was not a sound to be heard. In addition, the light from Serenity's horn was more than bright enough to allow us to see. A vent being dark was not actually factored into my ingenious plan, as for some reason I expected the secret passage way to be perfectly lit.

Though a more important question entered my mind. How was it possible a filly with such magical ability didn't have her cutie-mark yet? I was positive I was younger than Serenity when I got mine, and I still had no idea what mine meant. I crouched low as the stairs ended and nearly whacked my head off the ceiling. It seems even overlarge escape-route vents still weren't made for a pony my size, and I had more important things to worry about than cutie marks.

The vent twisted and turned as below me I could hear ponies idling chattering. Before you ask I did not bother to remember what they said, as idle chatter is usually trivial and non-important, but every time I heard them my heart jumped into my throat. Not out of fear, but out of not wanting to fight my way out of that damn hotel without a single weapon on me. Only a single shot rifle on my battle saddle.

Slowly we made our way through the vents, until it started to slope again, ending abruptly at a wall. Great. I suppose I could just kick the damn thing down. It always worked for my before. I lifted my hoof.

“... we need a patsy then.” A slick voice came from the other side of the wall, slightly muffled.

“Now, now,” a surprisingly feminine voice answered, “such an ugly term. All we need is a pony what knows how much a bottle cap is worth.”

“When Granny Dynamite finds out-”

“She wont. Don't worry your pretty head. Just get them ready... Poor Mustang won't know what hit'em.” Jackpot. Could I get anymore lucky? Stumbling into information just like that. Almost anti-climatically. I chuckled a bit at the thought.

Chuckled.

Wait. I could hear myself... fuck.

Looking down I could see Serenity's horn had died down, and could hear her panting for breath. Fuck.

Idiot, idiot. I let her get tired. Over use her magic and...

BANG

The bullet embedded into the wall right beside my head. "A rat?" The feminine voice said laughing a bit. "Sneaky Mustangs rats never stop crawling around my hotel. And now they think I'm an idiot and don't know my own hotels secrets? Tsk Tsk. Wont even need to call an exterminator for this one." The second shot ricocheted, skinning my leg just above my pipbuck and knocking me messily out of my stupor.

"Fuck." I said picking up the filly by the scruff of her neck.

We bolted up the stairs. Sort of. I had to crouch so I couldn't run, but I scooted as fast as I could for fucking sure.

My leg clanged nosily. My position was given away with every step as bullets flashed upwards through the vent. I had to stop. I threw Serenity onto my back and crouched down lower. I couldn't let my stupidly get her hurt. Again.

A sharp pain suddenly exploded through my back hoof. Gritting my teeth, I charged onwards. The vent creaked under me as more bullets sprayed, my blood leaking through the holes. Most missed. Still, it was all I could do to keep from screaming. Little light. Bullets everywhere. Serenity on my back.

I yelped in pain as a bullet scrapped my side. Another impacted my metal leg with a ting. The whole structured creaked. I kept moving though. Gotta keep moving.

There was a snap.

A creak.

Suddenly I was falling. The ground came up to quick. My chin cracked against the floor and I could taste blood. Somewhere Serenity was groaning. I heard shouts all around. But I could only see darkness.

I rose to my feet.

The remains of the vent tumbled off me. Looking up I could see the hole in the ceiling. And the parts of the vent that didn't break away. My exit. Now ten feet away and I couldn't jump that fucking high.

"She's a big one."

I looked down. The whole hotel seemed wobbly. Maybe I was dizzy. Head trauma is fun. But even with the wibbly-wobbly way of seeing things I recognized the barrel of a gun. It was attached to a battle saddle, that was attached to a dark green mare with a huge yellow mane of varying shades. On her flank I could clearly see a cutie-mark in the shape if a black cowpony hat.

Click.

So apparently long falls fuck up guns. Why do all my guns break? I took my mouth away from the bridle and lowered my body. Bullet holes or no, I was getting out of this hotel. "Oh, calm down," the mare smiled seductively. "You can't escape. We found your friend ten minutes ago." She motioned her head to the right where Flare was sitting at the end of the hall, tied up and smiling sheepishly. "Or did ya really think you'd stumbled onto our secrets? Silly rat, that's not how you play this game."

Celestia's Cunt. This sucked.

"Well..." I slurred through my bloody tongue.

"Owie." Serenity popped her head out of the rubble of our escape plan. "Wha... did we escape?"

“No, little one,” the green earth pony said, “but if you're good. And if you tell me why my hotel is infested with rats. ” she smiled brightly, “Then you might just. But if you lie to me, then mommy and I are going to have a little chat. In private.” I should have been worried about the impending torture and epic failing of my plan. Instead the only thing I could think of was...

“She’s not my daughter.”

Level Up!:

Skill Note: Sneak 40

Companion Perk Unlocked: Silent Goings: With Serenity in your party you have the option of removing all sound once a day for a five minute period.

New perk! Acrophobia: You have a fear of heights (probably due to some traumatic incident in your past). You're not a wimp, but you suffer -1 endurance and -15 DT when over 20 feet in the air, but gain +1 Endurance and +15 DT when on or under the ground. The sweet, sweet ground.

((This is the part where I thank Kkat for being awesome and doing awesome things, like writing stories for me to butcher. As well as a special thanks to my awesome editors theBSDude and Errant Indy.

Finally, a shout out to the FO:E Sidestory protodoc. All aspiring Sidestory writers should visit:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KaoFWVIFIMjYR2KmTWxwCYnvTZQcjEULO9YHSaqqk9U/edit?hl=en_US&pli=1#heading=h.ppfknyb4tr6))

Chapter 8: A Fine Line

“What you don't know, can't hurt you.”

There was something odd about Molly that I just couldn't put my hoof on. Maybe it was the way her ears seemed way too long and flop-ish, or that when she caught me staring at them she immediately hid them beneath her black cowpony hat. In fact, her entire face seemed off, unlike any pony I'd seen. Not ugly, she was quite cute, just... off. Her body seemed thicker than her height would suggest, and it may have been my imagination, but her legs were thinner and more... flexible? She looked different-er than any pony I had ever seen, that was for sure.

“Tell me.” She said trotting over to her desk. With a tap of her hoof, the earth pony flicked a small pair of sunglasses from her desk into the air, making them spin majestically before landing gently on her nose. “What is a Mustang rat doing in my hotel? And please, don't lie.”

I gulped.

The spacious office was surprisingly under-furnished in comparison to Roy Mustang's: the walls looked worn, the carpet threadbare, and one side was riddled with holes. Besides the desk (that was missing a leg with a stack of books substituting), the only furniture was the small chair the mare sat in, and a dirty mattress off to the side. I wanted to believe I had found the mare of the mansion, but given her room I couldn't tell. She called The Alehouse “her hotel” but her apartments left something to be desired from a gang leader.

Or maybe I was over-thinking it. That would be a first. She was clearly Molly.

Serenity squealed behind me. Snapping my head around I glared at the unicorn stallion foolishly trying to get Serenity to stand still. I took special care to memorize his face before another guard forcefully turned my head around with butt of his gun. All her guards were unicorns, my shoulder burning confirmed that, but she was an earth pony. Interesting. If I was a smarter pony I could have used that.

“Mustangs?” I took a gamble. “Not Mustangs.” I continued feeling all the eyes in the room turning to me. Defiantly a gamble. “Finishers.”

Is it bad when somepony laughs at your lie? Because the yellow-maned mare laughed far too hard for it to mean nothing. “No you're not. For one. You're ugly as fuck and smell like shit. They hire beautiful ponies only. Second. Seriously, no. Nice try. Now tell me what that ass, Roy, is bugging me about. Is he still as jealous as ever?”

So I laughed back. Well it was more of a smirking chuckle but it got across my fake derision as best as possible. “Mustang is an ass. Don't work for him. Finishers paid me.” Not technically a lie. Though I was getting tired of talking already. Even though I knew I was going to have to fast talk my way out of this situation, I really didn't want to.

“No. You don't. Stop lying or your daughter may never walk again,” The mare said with an off hand wave of her hoof.

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“No.” She just stared at me bewildered through her dark glasses. “She isn't my daughter. And. You won't hurt her.” She raised an eyebrow. “Because. I am not lying.” I added quickly. “Photo Fini-”

“Is not bold. She is many things, do not get me wrong, but she is not bold, nor will she ever be. This is a bold act.” She motioned to something behind me. “Not that it matters. I have spies around The Moon. They have seen you working inside there. Little rats should not think to toy with lions.” Though her mane was as golden and... large enough to be a lion’s, she was clearly not. I wanted to say she was a pony, but there was something wrong about that idea.

“Good. I was meant to be seen.” I gulped a bit before leaning in some, much to the chagrin of the two unicorns standing on either side of me. “Do you think. Only you have spies?” Once upon a time, I met a little filly named Spitshine. She played poker with raiders, and always won, not because she was smarter, or luckier, but because she could make the other players believe her hand was weaker (or stronger as it suited her) than it was. Pearly called it bluffing, and I think I was getting the hang of it.

“Really.” She laughed leaning back. “Okay. I’ll bite, tell me, little fish-turned-rat, what do The Finishers, those paragons of fabulosity and beauty, want with a stallion like Roy?” In addition to my meagre bluffing skills, I also had this plan ready in case things went horribly wrong. Because, you may have noticed, things went horribly wrong often. It was a speciality of mine.

“Him?” I scoffed. Behind me I could hear the weakened voice of Flare chuckle. To be honest I hadn’t even realized they dragged him into the room too. “Nothing. His hotel. That’s the prize.”

Molly, the leader of the Baises hummed, resting her head onto her foreleg. “So hard to decide. One rat or another. Still, a rat is a rat. No matter its mother. Tell me my mysterious rat, who holds your leash? You say Finisher, yet the Finishers have no reason to break in. I assume Mustang, but you deny it on threat of pain and death. Even more your leg implies you’re a friend of the ever-so-mysterious Mr House. So what rat? Am I to expect a squad of Ponitrons to burst in, just so you can be linked to the Galacians as well?”

“Truthfully. I was not to be seen here. Under Screenshot’s orders.” That peeked her interest. It was also part of my plan, using The Finishers second in command makes it seem like I went around Photo Finish. And before you get these crazy notions like I am not dumb as a rock, please understand that just because I am stupid doesn’t mean I can’t have bouts of good ideas. Also the idea for a backup plan was Flare’s... he even suggested The Finishers as the patsies, and asked them for permission for me. Honestly I was just taking credit for his idea... but in my defence I really wanted it to be my plan.

If you’re laughing at me please stop. That’s just rude.

“Screenshot. Is she in charge now?”

“No. Which is why. I wasn’t to be seen here.” So much talking. How did ponies do this all day. It felt like my tongue was going to fall off. I made a note to myself to never let Flare plan plans ever again. “I was to come here... and verify rumours.”

“Oh. Hah. So that’s it, little rat? You scurry in my walls, then crawl back to your master and tell her I plan to destroy the Mustangs,” She grinned a bit too much at that, “And then she plans to swoop in and steal my prize from under my nose, is that it?”

“Pfft” Flare said from where he was being pinned down behind me. “You don’t get the prize. At least you won’t no matter how hard you try.”

“Oooh. The Enclave Carrion wishes to speak,” the mare guffawed. “Squawk for me.”

“You aren’t stupid, and you know that the Galicians won’t let you control The Mustang’s casino OR their assets. You’re not the first to try and hold two blocks. The Galicians have always enforced one casino per gang, it keeps their enemies fighting against each other, serves to stop ponies from rioting and rebelling against tyranny, and because they want it so if they’re every taken down anarchy will

destroy the city.”

What? Did that make any sense to you?

“I see the remnants scavenged enough to educate their members before running from the clouds like a scolded puppy.” I could almost hear Flare seething. “It’s a shame. You are right. My grandfather tried not long after wrenching this casino away from its previous owners. Lost his life for it. I am not one to make the same mistake, and underestimate the Ponitron army.” She gave a quiet smirk to my right where I assumed Flare was standing.

“So.” I was getting close. I could feel it. All she had to do was take the bait. The delicious bait. “You need a puppet. Somepony. *Someponies*. To take over The Moon. While being in debt to you. Right?”

“Right.” Yes! She agreed! Plan successful, this called for a drink. “But.” Celestia please stop fucking me around. “I don’t really trust you. This is all good in theory, and under the assumption you’re really working for The Finishers, and they really want me to tell them how to run their shit if I get them a Casino on the strip. However it is still far more likely you are a Mustang rat.”

Lies. Lies and slander.

“Well.” I nodded my head towards the door. “Check out our ride. A sky-wagon. In fact. Photo Finish’s sky-wagon.” She hummed, and hawed. Apparently I made a good argument.

“Okay.” She nodded, standing up off her chair. Hah. That was easy. Wait, last time I thought something like that my whole plan nearly imploded. I mean Flare’s plan. “On one condition.” I blame my intelligence chip for giving me bad luck. “You have to fight for me.”

What.

“You see, while the Mustangs have hookers and drugs to keep guests entertained The Alehouse tries to appeal to a more base natural instinct. The love of violence. To that extent I turn trained dogs against each other, and ponies place their bets. Very lovely to watch. It is never to the death, of course, but accidents happen and blood is spilled.”

“Okay...”

“Good. Because you don’t have a choice, as I planned to make you fight anyway. since maybe you’re being honest with me I’ll only make you fight once. Against the current champion, Torr. He’s a lovely pet, truly, and gentle too. Outside of the ring.” She walked right up to me and reached up to pet me on the head. Really. One of these days I swore to end her. “If you win, you and your daughter.” I winced. “Can go back to the Mustangs, and find a door near the back of their casino. This door will lead to a small alley beside The Moon. You need to unlock it, and tell me when that is done to complete the plan. If you don’t, I’ll kill you, but only after my stallions have a turn at your daughter.”

Can you set somepony on fire with a look? I tried. I bet if I was a unicorn it would have worked.

“And that’s if you beat Torr. If you don’t, I keep your daughter here, and you complete my quest, anyway. Got it?” Yup. That was totally going to happen. “Nopony can’t say I didn’t give you a fighting chance? Besides even if you are just a Mustang rat, I have more than one way to skin a cat, so if you attempt treachery it’ll still fail.”

Survive, I whispered under my breath. I had to remember that.

“You won’t survive!” Flare flailed around gesturing wildly. He either knew his tail was on the line too, or he suddenly cared about me. Probably the first. “Did you see him? I mean for fucks sake-” I saw him.

We were hidden just off of a theatre-stage-turned-arena. What was once a classy playhouse, complete with glass chandelier, had turned into a fighting pit. The stage had been refitted with a large steel cage in which, I assumed, two ponies entered and one left. Dramatic, right? In the seats, ponies watched two of their brethren pummel each other into surrender, all while placing bets. The whole setup was made all the more classy by the blood stains -everywhere-, and the remains of the chandelier smashed upon the centre of the complex.

And, on the other side of of the stage, hidden from the crowd but not from me, was Torr. Now I have gone on and on about how large a pony I was, but this Pony made me look like a foal. He was over a head taller than me, and so bulky I had to wonder if his mother was minotaur. It'd be like if I started taking Buck, and didn't stop for the rest of my life. And even then he would have been bigger.

"Fillies and gentle colts!" Molly's voice erupted over the loudspeaker as she trotted back and forth in front of the cage, *"Are you ready for a fight?!"* The cheers of the crowd were almost deafening. *"Today, it's our reigning champion, the slow but steady Torr, set to take on his toughest challenger yet!"*

With that, the lumbering brute slowly walked his way onto the stage. It may have been my imaging but the ground seemed to shake as he walked. Either that or it was shaking from the massive roar that erupted from the audience.

"And his opponent!" She really did know how to put on a show.

I gulped and turned to my companions. They weren't heroes, I realized, they were simply ponies, who for one reason or another were stuck with me, following me. Even though I didn't understand why, I had to appreciate it. They were the closest things I had to friends since stable 42. "Hired Gun..." The small pink unicorn trotted to me, determination in her deep grey eyes.

"Yes," I said, partially drowned out by Molly.

"The mysterious mare without a name!"

Serenity looked down at her hooves, before turning her eyes back on me. "Don't die."

I nodded, and turned, and exited my hiding spot. To the roar of the crowd. The entire theatre was only half filled, but it was more ponies than I'd ever seen in one spot, at one time. And they were cheering for me. Against my better judgement I smiled. And even waved my metal hoof menacingly before being rudely shoved into the cage.

I turned and saw him.

I don't know how to explain the sensation as the yellow stallion glared down at me. The way he flicked his blood red mane out of his eyes, and whisked his tail as if about to charge. It made my chest... tight, almost. It made me want to turn and run back the way I came. It made me almost feel as if i was falling all over again. Then, it hit me. This sensation.

I was afraid.

I'd been afraid before: of falling, and I was afraid of getting Serenity hurt. But this was... something new. For the first time in memory I was unhindered, uninjured, and facing another pony. And I was scared of them. Fearful that they could actually beat me. I... I cannot explain how unnerving it was. That sensation tingling up my spine making my mane stand on end. I gulped visibly as Molly spoke.

"The current odds are 9:1 for Torr. Bid carefully and bid often, gentlecolts. Who knows how long this match will last." Thanks for the bout of confidence. I realized then, as Torr lumbered above me, that

Molly never intended me to win. This was just an act to beat up a rat.

“Let the fight... begin!”

The crowd cheered one last time. Then they were gone, and the world shrunk down to me and Torr. Molly, Serenity, the crowd, hell, even the cage vanished from my sight and mind. Slowly I strafed right, and the lumbering oaf followed. “Me.” He said slowly as we circled each other like Chimeras circling our prey, “Me Torr. Who you?”

“I’m Hired Gun.” I took a step back as my heart started pounding against my chest so loud I could hear it.

“Me Sorry. Hired. Sorry. You go. Bye bye.” His first swing was slow and clumsy. But I couldn’t move. My head started panicking and yelling but I couldn’t get my thrice-damned hooves to move. It was as if I was glued to the stage. Paralysed by fear, what was I coming to. Then I heard a voice in my head say, *Survive.*

I ducked.

The blow gazed the top of my head. Pain flashed as I jumped back, but the sensation melted away. I couldn’t even feel the blow. Not when he was coming at me again. Rearing up he lashed out but I danced backward. Dropping back down to all fours he charged me. Big as he was, he was slow, and it was the easiest thing in the world to roll sideways away from him.

That was, until my metal leg didn’t know the drill. The damnable thing got tangled up under me as I tried to get back to all fours. It took a precious second for me to get my foot back under me. Too long.

I didn’t feel the blow.

Nor did I notice I’d been thrown across the arena, slamming into a cage wall before slumping onto the ground.

Next thing I actually remembered I was opening my eyes to see Torr standing above me. One hoof raised. I was going to fucking die, even a stupid pony like me could understand that. I tried to move but pain lanced through my chest burning and stinging like I’d been shot with daggers on fire. I rested my head back down, and accepted my fate. Until I caught a glimpse of serenity standing beside the cage, tears in her eyes. *“Don’t die.”* I could almost hear her say.

Torr’s hoof came down.

And missed.

I managed to squirm myself under him, his hoof slamming through the stage, temporarily trapping him like a rat. The raging pain snaking through my chest didn’t even pretend to go away, but I gritted my teeth. Monster or not, everypony had a weakness. And under him I was in the perfect spot to exploit his.

I squished his naughty bits like I’d squish a bug.

He screamed and fell.

I dodged his falling body, and scrambled onto my hooves. I stood wobbly as he dropped to his knees. There was blood on the floor, but I didn’t know who’s. I was going to win though. I had to. With all the strength I could muster I lifted up my hoof.

And he kicked with his foreleg.

I had to jump back to avoid it causing pain to spike through my chest. It almost felt like my heart was

exploding. Twice. Still I kept on my hooves, even as he too struggled to his. Somewhere in the back of my mind I could hear the crowd cheering, but they vanished just as quick. In a fight there were only two ponies, everything else was just a distraction.

“You...” The hulking pony said. “You cheat. Me no like. Cheat.” No such thing as cheating in a fair fight. He charged full force at me faster than a pony that size had a right to. Without even thinking I stepped aside and lashed out with my metal hoof on his leg. The vibration of the hit sent shock-waves through my body as he tumbled and rammed head first into the cage.

I turned to face him. My whole body was shaking in pain and I could feel sweat drip down my face. I needed to end this I realized as I circled around him, but I didn't know how. I couldn't risk getting close as he was too strong by far, but I couldn't very well attack from a distance. For once I felt what it was like when regular ponies fought me. I didn't envy them one bit.

He charged forward again. Quickly I pivoted my body, and bucked. The feeling of my hoof striking his face with a crack was nearly orgasmic. Until, of course, he grabbed my other legs with both forelegs. I felt the strange sensation of lift as my connection to the earth was severed, and I was tossed. This time I felt the pain surge through my body as it slammed against the cage with an audible snap.

I think I broke the damn cage.

My body fell, but seemed to hang in the air, not falling the whole way. My eyes panicked, searching wildly as my whole body throbbed. If I was in a joking mood, I'd have asked somepony to get the number of the tank that hit me. Instead my thoughts consisted mostly of. Fuck, fuck, fucking shitty ass fuck. Celestia hoof fuck me with with the moon or something, fuckity fuck.

My skeletal metal leg was caught in a prong of metal jolting out where my body broke the steel cage. Tug as I might the thing wouldn't break free. Worse yet: I could hear Torr stomping up. With my heart racing, and my whole body throbbing Torr reared up behind me.

And I pulled free.

The hoof missed. Instead it struck the hole where my leg was stuck. Instead of being caught the metal ripped and tore at his flesh like the cage was a monster gnawing at its prey. Score one for fake legs. I reared up, and felt a tinge of pity as my hoof slammed into his face ripping his cheek to bloody shreds as his eye already began to swell. By the time I hit him again his eye was already swollen shut and blood flowed from his wounds turning his muzzle into a bloody mask. I reared up again.

And waited. I was done. I had won. By luck, or chance or skill I had him at my mercy. All he had to do was give up and let me have my victory. Instead he stared me in the eyes. “No. Me Torr. Me no lose.”

The next blow rendered him unconscious. His hoof still stuck in the fence as the metal bit his leg so deep I could see the slight glimpse of white bone through his wound. I turned to the crowd, and saw them for the first time.

Ponies of all different shapes and colours. Pink, and red, and blue. Unicorns, earth ponies, and even a pegasus or two. They were all watching Torr and I fight each other to bloody pulps. And they were cheering. These ponies didn't care about their brightly coloured coats, and manes. The only colour they cared about was red. How could I have ever thought that these ponies were worth fighting for? They were worse than monsters.

I gracefully strode out of the arena, a scowl on my face.

Except, that didn't happen. I tried to be all victorious, and epic, but the result was more like me falling face first into the floor with an echoing thud and a resounding “Oooooo,” from the audience.

“That is, Fillies and Gentle colts,” The weird-looking earth pony said standing above my resting body,

giving me a nice view of her rear.

I mean her... uh... not nice, more like pleasant? That's no good either. What about, her tail. Her odd looking tail, I didn't get a good look at it before but now I did. It seemed to be tightly braided with a little poof ball at the end or something. That was definitely what I was looking at...

"It seems that the Mighty Torr has been bested for the first time. An Impressive feat, even for a cyborg," That had nothing to do with it. My stupid leg got in the way more than it helped me. "Bet chits can be cashed in at the Box office in the back of the theatre, the next fight is between THE Batmane and Crazy Thunderhoof Facecracker at Eight AM. Be sure to come early for the best seat! In the mean time feel free to enjoy our many amenities. The White Tie restaurant is open until midnight, and of course the buffet is open 24/7. " She took a deep breath as I slowly squirmed my way over to the cage entrance. "Have a good night, everyone."

Finally the stage's curtains swung closed hiding my stupid mangled body from the gaping eyes of the crowd. "Well." Molly turned to me with a smile as Serenity took a tentative step forward. "You horribly injured my best fighter. You owe me, you little shit." Blinking I stared at her my mouth agape. "I'm just fucking with ya." She turned her head and gave a slight nod to Serenity who quickly charged forward.

"Ow," I winched as she hugged me, pain spiking through my chest stinging all the way down my spine. "Not so hard." With a squeak she jumped back and stared at me, a sad smile on her muzzle. "Your face is leaking," I said slowly. For some reason my head felt all wibbly-wobbly. "I won. Didn't die. Tolda ya I would. Need a drink." She quickly wiped the tears out of her eyes... and smacked me.

What.

"You've got a head wound: drinking is the last thing you needed to do!" I uh... No I didn't.

"No I don't..." I said doing my best to struggle past the pain and rise to my feet, and failing horribly as the effort sent spikes of pain into my chest forcing me back down gasping and wheezing. "Need a drink. Forget about, pain."

"Alcohol is a blood thinner." So... I just sort of stared blankly at her. "Argh. It's just... no drinking!" She said with a pout digging into her bag.

"She's right you know." I gave my head a half-turn to see Flare hanging upside down in the air snickering at me. "You're tough, you know that? I think I've only seen one other pony take a direct buck from Torr and live, never mind actually getting up." I did not feel tough. "And that pony didn't even beat him. Only other pony whatever beat him was Sleekhoof of the ShadowBolts, and that was more due to Torr being slow as shit. Yup, you're going to be famous for this, for at least a week. A week! I'm jealous, truly." he laughed doing, a quick flip.

"Let me guess," I groaned, "You could beat him?"

"Hell no! Are you bucking nuts! He'd have torn me to pieces... Don't give me that look. Just because I'm arrogant don't mean I am stupid, and besides I'm an explosive expert. You know, things that go BOOM. Not all this messy hitting and kicking, and, just no. Besides I couldn't stand being caged like this. Gotta be free you know." I'd no idea.

"Ek!," I squeaked as something warm and wet splashed on my head without warning. And it stung. Like fire. "What the-" I looked up to see an empty healing potion glowing above my head, "Ow. Why. Couldn't I drink it?" If it was any pony other than Serenity I would have glared. Pouring things on ponies heads just isn't polite unless you warn them first. Already I could feel the wound I didn't know I had start to stitch itself together on the top of my head.

Serenity smiled at me in a slightly patronizing way. "Cause your ribs are all screwy," No they weren't-

“OW!” She poked them to show me otherwise.

“And they might be poking your lungs.” I had to use my usual, 'what the hell does that mean look' before she continued. Flare just laughed. “It's like... the healing potions don't move your bones around or nothing, so if they healed in their wonky positions then they'd be poking into your lungs for the rest of your life... and that's... it's like deadly. I'm not sure though, but you should see The Watchers, they'll be able to fix'em up right good.”

“Can I break up this little love fest?” Molly snickered, leaning against the cage, her black hat slipped to the side, letting one of her long ears poke out. “You're not going anywhere until you talk to Mustang and make up some bullshit to appease him. And don't think I wont know. You got lucky this time.”

“Kind'a hard.” I said before biting my lip, and forcing myself up, “When. I can barely stand.”

The yellow-maned pony just smiled at me, “I've gone through worse. Stop whining like a bitch.” Obviously I glared at her, prompting her to wink under her dark sunglasses. “Find some way and get the fuck out of my casino. You know, before I regret my decision. I've killed ponies for smaller offences than breaking into my casino.” She snapped her head and barked at the unicorns tending to the broken and battered Torr. “Hurry up already.”

“Right...,” I groaned as Torr was levitated out of the cage. Molly followed with a wick of her tail. “Serenity. I need... something.” I wasn't quite sure what. Something for the pain. No what I was going to be walking out of her of my own strength without it. Then I remembered the two syringes of Med-X I confiscated from Flare back before the drug dealers base. “Med-X.”

Serenity sighed, before levitating it out of my saddle bags that I'd given to Flare to hold as I fought. (A huge mistake obviously considering he was an addict and I hadn't found the time to sell the drugs I nicked off him.) There was a sharp pain as the needle stabbed into my shoulder, a few seconds of nothing, then sweet relief. The pain washed away from me like the tide, leaving a lingering soreness, but nothing I couldn't handle.

Flare led the way like he knew the place, which he probably did, taking us through a series of back hallways before emerging in the theatre lobby from a door marked, “Employee Entrance Only.” Serenity, for the first time in a while, opted not to use me as a taxi, given my current condition.

The lobby had been beautiful once, with bright red carpets, gold inlaid wallpaper, and a marble staircase with gold railings leading up to the theatre balcony. Of course most of that had been destroyed; the carpet stained, the wall paper ripped. Though the staircase was reasonably intact. I couldn't help but wonder what the place looked like in its prime, no doubt it would have been a sight like no other. On the wall there was a slightly worn poster behind shattered glass. On it was a single grey mare with a dark grey mane, and some sort of... large guitar thingy leaning against her. I tried to imagine I was here to see her, walking in with a fancy dress on, and sitting to watch a musical performance in a swanky theatre. I tried to imagine I was in the past, in a place where were still able to sit down and enjoy something other than mindless violence and sex.

Which was stupid. The past was never coming back, and imagining it never helped no pony. The Med-X must have been messing with my skull. Moving on.

The rest of the hotel was set up in a similar swanky fashion. Red carpets, yellow-gold walls, with lots of lighting seemed to be the theme. It was honestly a nice change from The Moon (which seemed determined to make everything as dark as possible). I noticed at least two active restaurants, and the main casino floor had its own separate buffet table. I really wanted to ask what was with all the food, but chanced are I'd just be called an idiot.

“Congratulations on your victory.” A voice said as I attempted to leave the Celestia forsaken casino.

Turning I saw a cute orange little stallion with an overlarge cowpony hat. "You're great." He said with one of the brightest smiles I had ever seen.

"I uh..." Was I blushing? Oh for fuck's sake this was not the time for hormones. "Thanks. I guess."

"I mean really! It was just... amazing. Anyway," He scratched the back of his head with one hoof as his voice sorta of trailed away. That was until the other pony manning the desk shot him a look and nudged him, "Eep. I mean. Thought if you had time, wouldn't mind, you know, getting a bite. Sometime. Maybe. With me" Gulping, I did my best to force my stupid cheeks to stop burning.

"No." I quickly trotted out of the hotel pretending I was not just asked on a date by a cute stallion. I definitely did not run head first into a door labelled "pull". I did not try two more times to push the door open. And without a doubt I did not blush furiously and storm out when I realized what just happened. If anypony tells you differently they are a liar. And a cunt. And a liar.

I needed a drink.

Which of course meant I was not going to get one for hours or days because Celestia hates me and likes to laugh at my stupidity.

"I guess I was wrong." Flare said as I stormed northward up the main Dise street. While The Moon, and The Ale House were technically on the different sides of the same street the Ale House bordered the Dise fountain near the centre of the city, while The Moon was the first thing you saw entering the north gate.

"Wrong about?" I asked, as Serenity just giggled beside me. Clearly she knew something I didn't.

"Here I was thinking you were a fillyfooler," wait for it, "when in truth you'll just fuck anything. I bet if I prettied up a Minotaur you'd-" There wasn't any hope of ever getting respect.

So to make my point I kicked out Flare's front legs sending him face first into the ground. "Hate you."

Flare just chuckled, "Where would you be without me?" Not here, and I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. I really needed to change the topic, before ponies got on my case on how uptight I was. So as Flare jumped back to his feet, I asked the first thing I thought.

"Whats with Molly?" Silence. Serenity and Flare were giving me the creepiest wide eye'd expressions. "She looked weird. Her ears, they were too long. Her whole face. It was..." Silence. Flare and Serenity exchanged a look I couldn't quite decipher and I already regretted asking.

"She's a mule." Flare said in a hushed whisper, his pace suddenly picking up. He took the time to look around to make sure no pony nearby as we trotted closer to The Moon before continuing. "A Donkey Pony hybrid." A... what? Could they even do that? The idea just made me feel sorta sick in my stomach. Either that or the Med-X was wearing off. Pain flared up blinding me in agony for a second.

"And please." Flare said as I bit on my lip to try and relieve the pain, "Don't talk about it in public again. She does not like ponies mentioning." I reminded myself to keep that in mind as soon as I got some more Med-X.

The elevator stopped on the third floor. "Flare," I groaned as the new syringe of Med-X finally started to take effect, "put Serenity to bed." I quickly preempted her puppy eyes. "It's late. Its been a long night. Sleep." She pouted and grumbled and agreed. Not that she was getting a choice anyway. "Then meet me. Outside. Need your help."

"Sure, only because you didn't kill me for that fillyfooler crack." I pushed Flare out the elevator.

“I reserve the right to change my mind.” I said as the door closed. He just sort of smiled at me.

“Goodnight Mommy,” I could vaguely hear Serenity yell as the elevator jerked upwards.

It was then I realized that me and Flare were friends. At least I think we were, because honestly I was not well versed in the whole 'friendship' thing, but if we weren't than we were the closest thing possible without quite crossing that friendship threshold. And I certainly wasn't thinking that to keep myself from thinking about the fact that the elevator at any point could suddenly stop working and plummet me to my death.

One trip down a hallway and up a gilded staircase later, I was back in Roy's Penthouse. Instead of sitting in his office Roy was sitting on one of his many lovely couches, a mare to either side of him.

I may have just interrupted an orgy. I blushed just a bit, and walked in.

“So I said to the bitch if she can take my money she can take my-Gun?” His eyes grew wide as I stood there before him, bruises spattered across my chest, and my hair still stained with blood. “Holy shit. I heard you got captured!”

“I did.”

“And you had to fight that monster Torr.”

“Also true.” I sighed.

“What the fuck... whatever.” He clopped his hooves together, “Leave us, girls. Business matters. Shouldn't be long.” With an over-exaggerated shaking of hips the two whores slowly trotted down the stairs, seductively shaking their hips of course. I wasn't looking. It was just, they always did.

Roy however kept his eyes on their flanks until they left down the stairs before even bothering to address me. “Shit girl, take a seat.” I did. Flopping onto the couch I leaned back sighing as my injuries stung just a little bit. Above me I just realized was a skylight. Beyond the glass was blackness, no stars or moon, just clouds and the never ending darkness. I always found the night comforting back in Marefort. Infinite blackness in all directions but the small candle at my guardhouse. I don't know why, but it relaxed me.

“So.” He said tentatively as I turned to him. His fur coat was tossed haphazardly onto the floor giving a good view of his flank. And by flank, I clearly meant cutie mark. I wasn't sure what a jewelled cane was supposed to symbolize, but it was impolite to question another's cutie-mark, or so I was always told. “What the fuck?”

I told him what happened. About how the plan failed, we got captured, the deal, the fight, and all that. I even told him how I managed to talk my way out. “So she wanted me to unlock your *basement* door,” I lied, “The sewer door. Then tell her. For her attack.” Now before you get on my case for lying and breaking my contract please remember his words. He told me to 'get the juice' on what Molly was planning, but did not actually tell me to tell him. I broke no contract. It's not my fault he gave a vague order.

“Hah, that ass don't know who she fuckin' with. Mustangs will show her.” He grinned. “Go to her tomorrow and tell her you did it. I'll load the tunnels up with so many mines she wont know what hit her.” He grinned deviously, I wasn't nearly as confident. Even if the Baises had actually planned to attack from the tunnels it was still a terrible idea to plant bombs under your own casino. You know. As a rule.

“My payment.”

“You'll tell the bitch what she wants to hear first, can't have you running off on me.” Bullshit. I just

wanted my gun. Whatever there was not point in arguing, it's not like I had actually done what he wanted anyway. "Honestly, I expected you to fuck up. I mean you ain't a very subtle pony, but it's a pleasant fucking surprise."

"If you thought I'd fail..."

"Don't get uppity with me bitch." he stomped his hoof down, "I wanted you to succeed. But if you didn't it'd send a clear message that I knew she was up to something." Hooray for being expendable. "but you did it. Or close enough. Mustangs aren't down yet, you can bet on it."

I groaned stepping to my feet. My whole body was dull with pain, and even I could tell my breathing was laboured. "Okay."

"Where the fuck are you going?"

"Watchers." I turned my back to him. "Everything fucking hurts. If you got a Med-X..." I hated asking Roy for anything, but I knew the last dosage was not going to last me the long walk down the strip.

"Huh..." I guess he wasn't used to being asked anything. "Sure." My shoulder burned, because I needed more pain, as he floated a couple of syringes over to me. "On one condition." I turned and did my best not to glare. "I don't give a fuck if your filly wants to make extra cash or not. But under no condition. Do you ever fucking touch a client again. Or I'll rape her myself."

I was not in a pleasant mood when I met Flare outside The Moon, and the stupid water fountain, and stupid whores dancing in it did not improve it. I did not like being threatened, and I did not like anypony holding Serenity above me like she was a fucking bargaining chip. And yet everypony did. I promised myself to kill them slowly when given the chance.

"Hey." Flare said as I stormed past him, my rage and new syringe of Med-X masking the pain which still burned. "Okay..." He flew along side me as I stormed past stupid civilians as Flare zoomed beside me. "You said you wanted me. Are you okay?" No I was not fucking okay. Since sundown I'd been captured, interrogated, threatened, beat up, horribly injured, and generally treated like shit.

"No. Fucking hurts." It was true enough. The third Med-X didn't seem to help as much as the second or first. Better than nothing, but dammit pain hurts. "Walk with me. In case Med-X runs out." The walk from The Moon to the Watchers' headquarters was much faster when running doped up on Dash. Walking across the city was just painfully slow, but running was just out of the question.

"Can I talk at least?" He said floating backwards in front of me.

"Sure, whatever." I winced as a sharp pain shocked through my chest before subsiding. "Is Serenity. Asleep."

"Dunno." He shrugged. Apparently he didn't know how to follow simple orders... on the other hoof I actually said put her to bed, not to sleep. "last I checked she was lying in bed with her eyes closed. You don't have to be so protective of her, she knows more about the city then you do. I mean she was a slave before right? She's tougher than she looks." She was going to be a slave but I saved her. Being knowledgeable and responsible are not the same thing, but I was too pissed to care.

"It's late. She's young. She needs sleep."

"Yup. And you're planning something." I hated it when Flare read my mind.

"No. My plans suck," I groaned and stopping for a second to admire the water fountain in the cities centre. For some reason I really loved the statue of that stallion rearing in the centre of the fountain. I looked up at Flare. "However once we find out. How much surgery I need. You need to go to the

finishers.”

“Wh-oh. Yeah. The Baises didn't give back the sky-waggon did they?” I shook my head. “Yeah... chances are they'll want some sort of compensation for the trouble it's going to take them to get it back. Maybe I'll have to clean up another druggie, or sort out a Minotaur family dispute. Whatever it may be I had to take the job. The Finishers were the only non-dicks I'd met since getting to that damnable city and I wasn't about to break our relationship.

“Yeah.” I said continuing south down the street. “Exactly.”

“So why couldn't your filly come for this?” he asked being careful to fly out of the way of the robotic ponitrons that patrolled in front of “The Clips And Clops” as we passed by it.

“She is not my daughter. Fuck. Is that so hard?” Seriously it was just getting annoying.

“Honestly? Yeah, it's a little hard to believe,” he said as I stared upwards at the Clips and Clops Tower. It always amazed me every time I saw it, rising up so high shining like a pink sun breaking through the darkness. Part of me really wanted to see the view from up there... the rest of me wanted nothing to do with it, knowing that it was way too fucking high and it would end badly for everypony involved. Mostly me, of course. Flare sighed snapping me out of my trance. “You treat her better than most mothers I've seen. You might as well be her mother.” He shrugged. “She wouldn't mind it.”

“How do you know?”

“What?” He smirked, “We can talk without you. I bet you I know more about Serenity's story than you because I try to learn. She lost her parents when she was a foal. Or she never had them. She doesn't even know. Watchers teach but they never gave her love, you know. Can you blame her for wanting something to stick to?”

“What. Are you a psychologist?” I growled, “I am not her mother. Pretending. Wont make it so.”

“What's wrong with pretending?” Yeah he wouldn't mind it, being a druggie. “I mean. Fuck. Sometimes all you have is hope, and imagination.”

“What do you know?”

He stomped down in front of me.

Seriously.

“Where did you come from? Some magical land where ponies don't die, where life doesn't suck, where you weren't living on the edge wondering when the fragile peace would finally break down? Both my parents we're killed by raiders, my brother was shot down and tourtered by minotaurs when the fuckers first came here, and my sister was forced into prostitution by the stallion you work for. So excuse me if I want to imagine a better life. That's what hope is isn't it. Imagining something better?” His idea of imagination was playing house and getting high on drugs, so no, I didn't agree with him.

I pushed past him. “I really. Don't want to talk about it.”

“Okay. Whatever.” He sighed. “What have you got against being a mother anyway? From what I've seen foals are the only things you don't consistently want to smash into a bloody pulp.”

“It's...” Honestly I had a lot against being a mother. So I kept walking south past the apartment complex the Remnants called home, before I answered. “Difficult. I guess. Like...”

“Oh! Is it like some sorta history thing? Like your mother beat you as a child and now you're afraid you'll follow in her foot steps...” I just sort of glared at him. “What! When I was a little colt I was going to be an army doctor specializing in mental disorders.. I'm not as stupid as I look... Well I never

actually went past a few classes, when I found out I'd have to go to The Flankyard to study I became an explosive expert. Also it paid more." Explosions paid more than a doctor... okay then. "But I have a basic knowledge. Tell me about your childhood."

"No." The Watchers fort seemed so far away.

"Why not? You know you don't *have* to be mysterious all the time. I asked Serenity, and she doesn't know what you did before you found her either. So whats the deal. You hiding something. Did you used to be a raider? Or... I have no idea. It's just," he floated upside down in front of me, "weird. You appear from no where, save a foal, then get knee deep into manure and politics in a city you've never even heard of. I just... you make no sense."

"If I wanted you to know. You'd know." I groaned ignoring the fading effects of the my pain killers.

"So I never get to know?"

"Yup." To my surprise he laughed.

"Well... that's your choice. Knowing you, it'd have to be something bad, and since you didn't kill me when you could have, I have no grounds to argue for more special treatment, eh?" I smiled through the pain. Partly at whatever this heart to heart thing we were having, and partly because the we had finally arrived.

I trotted up to the Watcher's Fort entrance where two ponies stood, battle saddles ready for any possible attack. Between them stood the huge hulking, ominous figure of Ginger the Minotaur. Predictably most ponies took the wide route around the fort, less the minotaur look at them! It'd be a sin. I trotted up happily. Oh there was still pain as the Med-X neared the end of its effectiveness, but I knew it would last much longer.

"Hey." I said to the guards. One smirked so I guess he remembered me from that Dash incident. Lovely. "I need... uh... healing."

"I Can se-"

"You!"

Me?

"Is it you! No way..." I turned to see a sea-green older mare trotting up her eyes wide. "Clean Cutt. He told me. Are you..." She gulped, "You couldn't possible be Hired Gun." I blinked a bit and nodded. "You know my daughter! I mean... you knew her..." My stomach twisted itself into knots.

"Who?"

"Her name was Lye. She... she went up with a caravan, Clean Cutt said you were there! When... when you were attacked." Lye... how long had it been since that moment? I had tried so hard to forget about her. "Is it true?"

"I... yes." I did my best to avoid eye contact, but the mare was very persistent. "We were... attacked. She died a hero, trying to protect everypony. They took me captive. She was a good mare." The sad older mare just nodded at me. "When I had the chance. I took revenge for her. For Lye's sake."

"What!" My eyes shot up meeting hers as she shrieked. "My baby died! And you think *More* killing will help bring her back! Monster!"

I stood dumbfounded as she pushed past me into the watcher camp. "So." Flare said from above me, "More of your mysterious past?"

“So what seems to be the problem?” I blinked at the doctor as I leaned heavily on the tent's cupboards before looking down at my side. Since the kick the bruise had went from blue to red, to a mottled yellow that looked positively sickly. “Oh that.” He poked it in a very undoctoer like fashion. A wave of nausea burst through me sent my stumbling to my metal knee with a taste of vomit in my mouth. “Does it hurt?”

This doctor. As Celestia is my witness...

“I'm kidding. Yeah you got fucked up something fierce.” I stumbled to my feet glaring at the black coated doctor. “Hum... wait... shit! Are you that mare that fought Torr!” Seriously? I nodded hoping it'd make this stupid conversation shorter. “Mr New Haygas was talking about that. Shit. I mean... sorry.”

“Are you sure... you're a doctor.” I growled between my teeth.

“Y-yeah. Well, mostly.”

Mostly?

“I mean I'm getting full doctorship in a few weeks,” He slicked back his long plain white mane, “Since I'm the new guy they make me take the overnight shift. Shitty I know, but hey it's a living. So. Torr. Damn. You know they're still working on him,” I raised and eyebrow. “His leg got fucked. You did it, or was it when they tried to move him. Way I hear it somehow he lost a huge chunk of bone. Healing potions can't fix that shit, and we don't got the supplies. Best case scenario he gets an augment, or becomes a cripple.”

So on top of all the other ways I fucked up I managed to cripple a slow pony, thus stopping him from ever making a living. Well done Silver, you're a real class act. Should go burn down a orphanage next.

“Oh.” That reminded me of something. “In my, urgh.” Pain washed over me, but I fought through, “Saddle bag. Some drugs. For payment.” I was lucky enough not have bet away the drugs I confiscated from Flare during my drunken binge. Hopefully that would be enough to pay for whatever surgery I needed.

The doctor nodded and my shoulder burned as his magic rummaged through my bags. “Wait.” A container of something was suddenly floating in front of me. “Is this hydra?”

“The label thinks so.” The doctor blinked before looking at the glowing container to confirm. Laughing he patted me on the shoulder.

Sending spikes of pain through me.

That time I actually did vomit.

“Sorry..” he said as I spat and wiped my mouth. The taste of vomited permeated every breath, and made me want to puke more. “But, seriously. This hydra, it's very rare. The last shipment we got from Hoofington was over a month ago, and not a single word on why it has been delayed.” Okay... honestly I didn't even know what it did. I only took it because it looked drug-y.

“Whatever.” He just sort of laughed. I really hated my doctor.

“Okay! You first. Looks like you have come shattered ribs, we're going to have to remove them.”

“Why not? Heal?”

“Trust me. I'm a doctor.” The black coated doctor gave his very best smile... and I wanted to vomit again. This day was not going well, and it wasn't over yet.

Gentle winds blew across the field, making the flowers dance between the vibrant green grass. It was a cool breeze that just barely tussled my pink and white mane and tail. Sighing, I rested my head backwards and let the breeze wash over me. Above me, the clouds glowed such a vibrant yellow, they looked like they were on fire. Like the sun was back. It took me a full minute of basking in warm rays of the beautiful afternoon before I realized I was resting my head in another pony's lap.

Rolling I left my hooves sink into the grass, before climbing to my feet. Before me was a pony with a red mane and red coat. She gave me the same fiery look she always had, her green eyes burning with passion. "Good morning," she said. I had always wondered what heaven felt like. As I lay back down, resting my head on her, I think I got my answer.

Drip drip drip.

My eyes jolted open as something splashed on my forehead. Just in time for whatever it was to splash directly into my eyeball. Squeaking I sat up and shook the liquid out letting the tiniest bit of it to splash on the ground. "Blood." I realized what the red droplet was. Against my better judgement, I looked up to the pony whose lap I was sitting in. It was still Wildfire only...

Drip drip drip.

"Don't you still love me?" Wildfire asked, half of her head a bloody crater from a sniper's bullet. The corpse gave me a grim red smile, "I didn't mean what I said. I only meant... it wasn't your fault. Don't blame yourself. I'm sorry." Her mouth moved slowly but her voice seemed detached from the movements. "Just wake up, please," her voice whispered in my head but the corpse's mouth didn't move.

"Heh." I stepped back as memories of her voice poured through my head. "Yeah, this is not happening."

While I wasn't looking, the plains had turned into a deep forest like the ones I had seen in books. Sunlight streamed through the thick canopy dancing on the green red and yellow vines. But the corpse of Wildfire stood in shadows, and when the many forest bugs moved too close they dropped to the ground and caught fire.

"Why can't you just talk to me!? Why must you always hide?" He mouth was still but the voice rang through the forest like a wave. Light burst forth as the trees around her caught fire. The smell of smoke and burning flesh filled my nostrils.

Backing up I hit a wall of trees I could not pass. "Wake up," a tender voice said. "Wake up."

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"Pleasant dreams?" My eyes burst open to see Flare's pink eyes right in front of my face. "you were blushing in your sleep... were you dreaming about me?"

I shoved Flare's face away. "No. Creeper." He nickered as I slowly rolled off the bed, landing on the ground with a thud. A dull throbbing sensation shook through my chest and back, but it wasn't that bad. "Did you see. Finishers?" I took a look around the hospital room. It was the same tent as before only now a pile of bloody rags were thrown in a corner beside a bin of similarly stained scalpels. On one of the counters a few empty healing potions were strewn haphazardly.

"Uh." He flapped his wings a bit before tucking them back in, "Don't you want to check with the Watchers. See if you're... fit to leave?" I shrugged.

"Well." I said stretching a bit, feeling the strain on my tense muscles. Those healing potions really were a thing of beauty. "I am walking. Surgery was success. Removed ribs. I think." I turned to where the bruise had been but it was completely gone now save for a small off coloured patch of my coat. Magic,

who would have thought? You couldn't even see the scars. "Been out too long."

"Like four hours total, considering you just had surgery..."

"Too long. Some Med-X. I'll be fine." Just a bit to remove the pain. "Still have work to do," I said under the assumption The Finishers did in fact have work for me. I just sort of assumed ponies were going to get me to do their dirty work.

Flare looked at me with a pained expression before rolling his eyes and looking away. "Whatever. Clean Cutt came here personally to tell me to stop you from doing something stupid, but whatever. Not like I could stop you if I tried." Nope. "You're popular by the way. Since I got back from The Finishers, Clean Cutt came to visit, then that mare that flipped out at you in front of the gate, and then some pony who heard you were a mercenary and wanted you to take a job in some fucking desert to the north west."

"You told him to fuck off, I presume?"

"Course." He bowed elegantly, his out stretched wings knocking over a IV rack. "Meant to do that."

"Totally." Suddenly, and without warning my head was swimming with stupid emotions. "Listen," be prepared for something stupid, "about before. I'm sorry for getting mad. At you." That's right I just apologized. Seriously.

"W-what," he looked at me his eyes wide in shock, almost as if he couldn't believe it. "Right. Me too. Don't worry. C'mon," he said flying out of the tent, "The Finishers wanted you as soon as you're ready, and, fuckit, you say you're ready so you're ready."

The camp was silent as death. We tip toed our way to the gate, and slipped past the guards with nary a nod. Now, I could bore you with a long, painful description of our walk north from The Watcher's fort to the main Dise gate, into Parasite Mound and The Finisher's headquarters. Hell, I could even give you a word by word of Flare's thrilling recount of the Battle Of The Song (a name apparently made up by a guitarist ten years later I should add) where the Baises took over the Ale House in the middle of a concert.

But I am far too nice to make you suffer through that. To keep things short, and your mind focused, let us say it is not important. After the long walk past the creepy Ponitrons, we made it through the Dise Gate, through the blackened streets of Parasite Mound (where I could feel eyes watching me from the darkness, piercing my coat and making me shiver). How I hated Parasite Mound.

Also the name. Such a fucking stupid name.

There it was, The Finisher's headquarters, shining brightly through the dark town like a miniature sun. No pony would dare attempt anything close to Photo Finish's eye. Groaning my teeth fumbled with my saddle bags before pulling out the last Syringe of Med-X and stabbing it into my shoulder. There was a sharp pain, and then sweet relief. Flare gave me an odd look before pushing through the doors of their office, blinding me with light.

"You, are late. De Photo Finish, she does not like to wait," said a red pony, dolled up in the Finisher's usual striped dress and sunglasses.

"Screenshot." I nodded politely. "Sorry. My chest was opened up. And bones were removed." There was a split second of revision on the ponies face, before she shooed it away.

"How... horrifying. No matter. De Great Photo Finish Awaits!" She lifted a hoof into the air! "We Go!" And was off like a bolt of lightning. Now last time we went through this I had to chase her up three flights of stairs. This time she burst through the nearest door.

I followed in a slow canter, walking into what appeared to be a small theater. Strange music blared over the loudspeakers, and various circular tables were scattered across the room. Starting at the far end and striking outwards was a long crudely made catwalk half covered by carpet with a single sultry mare trotting down the runway, spinning in front of Photo Finish at the tip of the catwalk. She sat with a stern face sipping on some sort of pink-y drink. I really hoped it was alcoholic and I was allowed to have some.

“Sit,” she commanded. “Dese recruits...,” she shook her head as I pulled up a chair. “No. It's just. No.” Her magic flared up as she levitated her drink to her lips. “No class. No style. No no no. Where is da magicks?” As the next sultry mare trotted down down the catwalk wearing what could only be called a dress by the strictest terms, I really didn't see much of a problem. “Drink?”

“Yes.” For some reason Flare chuckled beside me. Not unsettling at all.

“Now, now. Hired Gün. Ve are nice ponies, ja? We help ponies and moreover we do our utmost with all out strength to keep da streets safe. Ve have been nice to you, I, Photo Finish, have been nice. Now you get us into tricky situation, a tricky dangerous situation, so what do you say?”

“Sorry?”

“Yes. Dat, it is a start. Not enough.” Was it ever enough? Sighing, I leaned back and kept my eyes focused on the Stallion sauntering up the isle in a skimpy dress. Par for the course for The Finishers, I was just trying to make myself seem calm during the negotiations. “Sorry is not enough, compared to negotiating with the Baises for our Stupendous and marvellous flying machine, *and* having to pretend to work with those... ugh.” Visible disgust was on her face.

“You don't like the Baises?” I said as my pink drink finally arrived. I quickly picked it up and downed the sweet tasting nectar with great pleasure. It was fruity with just the barest hint of alcohol but that hint was enough. Especially when they poured me a second.

“You know nothing. They... A dress is only as dazzling as its wearer. Molly. That Molly, she, is the problem.” I raised my eyebrow and she just sighed. “It matters not, what matters is that ve cannot become her thrall. I, Photo Finish, cannot allow it. If she kills those despicable mustangs and lifts us upon his seat, den our power vill exist not for real but as an imagining. No. Ve cannot.”

“And you can't tell her no.” We both shot a glare at Flare who was leaning back in his chair his yellow mane messily covering his eyes. “What. It's true. Molly don't like being told no and The Finishers would not stand her wrath. I heard when she first got the job one of her underlings had the gall to call her a mule like she is and sh-”

“Shutup.” I turned back to my drink. The third one, I couldn't remember when I finished the second one but it was delicious. “So. What do you need?”

“The Galicians need to be informed. Alas, it cannot be I who tells them. They have no love for The Finishers and the hag would not trust The Great Photo Finish. So I need another, one who can be believed.” The music stopped as the last model disappeared through the curtains at the end of the stage.

“Me?”

“You. I, Photo Finish, said you will be out shining star across Dise, and Photo Finish does not lie. You are know to have fought against Torr, you are known to work with the Mustangs. You are believable... And frankly you look not smart enough to lie.” I could so. I lied all the time.

“Okay... so I have to speak... with...” I'd no idea who was the leader of the Galicians. I knew Roy ran the mustangs, Molly the Baises, and House was House. But the Galicians were a mystery.

“Grannie Dynamite.” Really? Her name sounded even more fake than mine. “But first.” She clapped

her hooves together.

Suddenly at the end of the stage the curtains pulled open with a blare of music and a flourish. On the end of the stage surrounded by the models was a brown wooden circular structure. When a model tapped it, it swayed and drips of water splashed over the top onto the stage. Soapy water.

My face paled and I turned to Photo, “What is this.”

“A bath.” What. “Your friend, Mr Flare, thought you might not go willingly.” Serious, what. “You are to go as my envoy. A disciple of Finish, to speak with my, Photo Finish’s, voice under Screenshot’s guidance.” No. This could not happen. “You must be clean.”

“No fucking way!” I tried to lift my hoof at her. Tried. Blinking I looked down at it as it wobbled and did not respond. My eyes darted around the room landing on the three drinks before me. “Did you... drug me...?” Photo Finish gave the daintiest of nods.

Around me the ponies surged. Tugging and pulling me closer to soapy doom.

“Take off her cybernetic.”

“Yeah, not supposed to get wet.”

“Guns too.”

“Ew, what did I touch? There’s something living on her.”

“Is it supposed to be that colour?”

“Maybe her cutie mark is dirt she never scrubbed off.”

As I was dragged closer and closer, the one word I could think of was: *Survive*.

But there was no way I was surviving this.

Footnote:

*Level Up!*

*No New Perks Or Stat Milestones. Wow you suck.*

((Well, here we are again. I’d like to thank Kkat for making this beautiful world for me to play in, and thank her again for all the work she has put in as FoE nears to a close. I’d also like to give a special thanks to my editor, theBSDude, for making this chapter readable. And of course to Sidefic proto doc. ~No One~))

## ***Chapter 9: Ain't No Rest For The Wicked***

*“There are, always and only, bad people, but some of them are on opposite sides.”*

“I hate baths.” I growled, as my head surfaced from the frothy broth. Flare just smiled from across the room at me... so I splashed him. It wasn't the most mature thing to do, but seeing his green and yellow mane dripping over his eyes made me grin, so whatever.

Wiping his wet mane out of his eyes, he smirked at me, “How old are you again?”

“Shut up,” I said, lowering my head back into the water. “This is your fault.” Dipping my muzzle into the water, I had nothing to do but blow bubbles as some mare scrubbed my back with a brush. Normally that'd be a more exciting prospect, but being drugged and forced to bathe put me in a bad mood. At least Serenity wasn't here to mock me too.

“She is done.” Photo Finish intoned halfheartedly behind me.

Blushing, I shook off my hair and had intended to use the newly renewed feeling in my legs to climb out of the wooden tub. What actually happened was I tried to climb out, lacked the capabilities with only three legs, and slipped. My body slammed into the edge of the tub, shaking it before it ever so slowly tipped over, spilling me and a wave of reddish brown water over the floor.

Groaning, I opened my eyes to see Photo Finish lifting a hoof up dramatically as my bath water dripped off it. “You have gotten my floor wet,” she pushed her sunglasses down to give me a good long look at her stern eyes. “It is, dirty now.”

“You took my leg.” I groaned and rolled to my feet, doing my best not to fall over. A tough task, everything considered. I turned my head away from the smug gang leader. After they'd drugged me and dumped me in water, they'd levitated me into some back room; and let me just say, that floating in a rickety container without muscle control was not frightening at all.

“Yes yes, but you look Marvellous dahling.” With a flash of magic, and a sharp pain where my metal leg should have been, I was suddenly staring at myself. I had to admit that without the blood and grime, my mane with looked much better, if a bit too long for my liking, and my coat seemed to positively shine. Had it always been so light? I guess it must have, but damn, did I look good. Or I would have, if not for the metal plate screwed to my torso with various sockets and gears to attach a leg to.

“Well,” Photo Finish added peeking her head around the full length mirror, “maybe not marvellous, but close, yes, very close.” Rolling my eyes I took a quick hop back.

“My leg, please.” With a single sharp step, a pony zipped up beside me levitating my leg. Excellent. I turned my head to it... wait was it? “Okay ju-.” Before I could comment on what they'd done to my leg, it was shoved into the socket.

Pain flared through my body, blinding me and dropping me to my knees. It almost felt like I had been bucked by Torr again, only this time when the pain faded it stayed away. Seething through clenched teeth, I stood shakily back to my feet as Photo Finish chuckled daintily beside me.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes.” I growled, shaking my metal leg and stomping quickly. It always felt weird when it was re-attached, as if it had too much feeling and burning in multiple spots, but it went away eventually. Just another benefit of losing your leg in an unfortunate stupidity accident. “No,” I growled, looking down

at my mechanical leg. “Why did you paint my leg purple!?”

Flare laughed so hard he crashed into a near-by wall. My ears burned but I stood my ground. It was my fucking leg and they went and purple-ed it when I was being drugged and bathed, and no part of that sentence is right in any way. Seriously, I was a cybernetic killing machine not a doll!

“To make it beautiful dear.” It wasn't supposed to be beautiful. It was a device I used to smash ponies' skulls in. Argh, I hated these ponies so much, and I knew it was only going to get worse. Photo Finish quickly clopped her hooves together and trotted through the nearest door, to get away from my murky bathwater no doubt, and beckoned me to follow. I knew I was in trouble.

Through the slightly dingy and dim halls of the backstage of the Finish HQ, we were quickly led into, you may have guessed it, a dressing room. “No fucking way.” I skidded to a stop at the entrance. The sight of all those, ugh, dresses made me sick to my stomach. I was against dresses as a rule, and that rule was never wear anything I looked ugly in.

“You vill,” Photo Finish's glasses shone eerily with light, “und you vill like eet.” She walked right up to me and poked me in the chest, “You owe me. You vill do this.” We matched glares for a second, but I broke first. I'd already agreed to the job, and that meant I had to go through with it, for good or ill. By the way my stomach was twisting, ill was the most likely.

“Fine.” It did not take them long to get me all dolled up. The dress they put me in was not the usual Finisher dress (I guess it was more of a uniform), but a white dress that flowed over my tail and onto the ground behind me. The lacy trimming was all a deep shade of of red with small rubies gems embroidered into the fabric. Around my neck was a simple tight copper necklace with a jewelled pendant. When I looked into the mirror, despite the fact it looked a bit tight, and my leg looked weird in it, I did look... well good.

I've lost all my mercenary cred.

“Humm.” Photo Finish stalked around me, “It. It is missing something.” Like taste. “Hum.” She poked and prodded, and lifted before turning to face me. “Aha! I, Photo Finish, has got its!” With a quick flurry of magic her pink sunglasses were suddenly on my face. Now I'd heard of wearing rose tinted glasses but this was ridiculous. The constant pink tint made me feel like I was in some foals fairy tale. “Perfect. It is needed, so they know you are with the Finishers.” I thought it looked nicer without the glasses. “Now for the other.”

Other?

Everypony in the room turned to Flare, who until then had been grinning along like a mad pony. Like a scene from a pink dream, the ponies tackled him, tearing off his red jumpsuit. In less than a minute it was no longer Flare standing before me, but a pretty blue mare in a frilly dress and a deathly scowl on her face. His dress seemed skimpier, and was a deep green with frilly light green ruffles barely covering his rump. Yeah, it was kind of cute.

“Its not that bad.” It took all of my self control not to burst into laughter. Turnabout was so sweet. “You look. Pretty.” He just glared at me from behind his own pair of shades as a scarf was tied around his neck. Under his dress, I could see his wings struggling to move until Photo Finish bopped him on the nose.

“Shush. This vas your idea.” I will admit that a stupid grin was plastered on my face, but dammit it was hilarious. If only Serenity was there to laugh at him with me... except then she'd see me in a dress. Yeah scratch that, I'd just tell her the abridged story later. “I cannot have un-pretty things go in my, Photo Finish's, place.”

The door swung opened and in strolled a red mare, “Are we almost do-what the fuck?” Screenshot's eyes were wide as she stared at me and Flare in our pretty dresses. The Finishers' second in command just shook her head and facehoofed. “Photo Finish I-”

“Enough, Screenshot.” Photo Finish trotted up haughtily to the red mare with a sly grin. “I, Photo Finish, will not allow my name to be used by those who are not beautiful. I know your standards are low, Screenshot, but do try to remember why we exist, ja?” With that, Photo Finish and her Entourage vanished through the door leaving me, Flare, and a slightly bitter Screenshot.

“Maybe you should remember.” She said, and I got a feeling in my gut it wasn't something I wasn't supposed to hear.

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Dawn broke over the horizon, turning the ever-present cloud layer into a light-show of reds and oranges. With a slight smile, I turned my head back south, following behind Screenshot and Flare. As we traversed the strip, more than one pony stopped to whistle at us. Of course, most of those times, the ponies that whistled seemed to be focusing on Flare. It was a good day.

As we walked nearly nopony spoke: Screenshot seemed to be too busy stomping to speak, Flare was far too busy blushing furiously (a fact I made note of), and I didn't speak on principle. If only more of my walks went so quietly.

Walking around the statue, a small orange pony with an overlarge cowpony hat waved and whistled at me before his friend kicked him. I just turned away and pushed my sunglasses back up, blushing ever so slightly. I had to admit it was a nice change from ponies immediately trying to avoid me on sight.. Even still, I was counting the minutes to get out of that stupid dress. At the best of times, I looked hideous in a dress and this one was a few sizes too small to boot.

Then came the Clips and Clops Casino: home to Celestia knows what. I had to stop and stare at the huge tower with the pink pony head cresting it one last time. Damn, it was impressive but I kept no illusions of ever getting to the top... an earth pony should stay on the earth.

Flanking the Entrance stood a row of creepily still Ponitrons, their screen-faces-things stoic and staring forward. Until, of course, we got close to the door. Turning in sync, their faces displayed a burst of static before changing to that of a grinning pink pony with hair that looked like a candy cane. “Howdy Do~ Welcome To The Clips And Clops!”

What the fuck? The Face was smiling and talking excitedly in a high pitched voice about the Casinos many, many (many) amenities, but the body stood eerily still. When the recording was done it was replaced by a burst of static and its usual army face returned. I am not going to lie, that was some of the creepiest shit I'd ever seen.

“What,” Flare nickered as he trotted up beside me, “never been to the Clips And Clops before?” He knew very well that I hadn't. “A bastion of yesteryear,” he stopped to wave his hoof dramatically at the door, “owned and operated by the Equestrian Ministry Of Moral, it has kept their particular flavour after the war. Oh yes, my second favourite casino after The Moon, and so very much better on Dash.” I shot him a glare, warning him not to make the money I paid for his cleansing go to waste.

“Silence! You shall be quiet unless I, Screenshot, say otherwise.” She turned her head and gave me a smirk. “Is zis understood?” Right, because I really wanted to do all the talking anyway.

We walked into the casino, and I was assaulted by pink. The doors lead to the main gambling floor, a large room with an arching roof with, no kidding, streamers and balloons of all colours hanging from it. The wall were painted in various shades of pink, and the slot machines lined up across the floor were

shaped like cupcakes. Across from them were more than a couple blackjack, poker, and craps tables that too looked to be shaped like various sweets. Was this really a Dise casino or had I walked into a filly's daydream?

BOOM

Instinct took over. Spinning toward the source of the explosion, I pushed Flare behind me with my hoof and crouched down ready to strike. Only, what I was staring at was a table in a small restaurant off to the side of the casino, that was covered in confetti and balloons. That couldn't have been what I'd heard, so I looked further spotting a baby blue cannon still smoking.

“Why is there artillery inside?”

The adrenalin pumping through my veins nearly exploded when something touched my shoulder. I came very close to kicking the offending pony before I saw it was Flare. “Calm down. It’s a party cannon.” Screenshot was laughing at me, along with half the casino floor. I was blushing so much I probably blended in with the decor.

“What?” I said in a low voice, barely recognizable under Screenshot's laughing. She didn't have to make a show of it.

“It's a cannon,” Flare said as the cannon operator turned it at an empty wooden table, “that shoots parties.” With a boom, the cannon fired, sending a pink lacy table cloth over the table in a flurry of confetti and balloons.

It was a cannon that shot parties. Sure, why not?

You know, when I'd planned to go to The Finishers to repay my debt to them, I thought it was going to be something exciting. Raid a drugdealer's base. Fight off insane ghouls. Something along those lines. Not have a bath, get dressed up pretty, and go to a land of pink parties. Celestia's cunt, I needed a drink.

Screenshot shook her head after wiping tears of laughter out of her eyes and continued through the Casino. Flare followed behind, a smug smile on his face until, I assume, he realized he was still dressed like a pretty filly. I mostly kept my eyes on the carpet as I walked, the casino's bright and happy atmosphere being way to much for me to handle. Anything was better than this, even The Moon.

Surprisingly, Screenshot did not take us to an elevator. I was half expecting the bosses chamber to be at the top of the tower and I was mighty glad it wasn't. Don't get me wrong, I had no problem with Mustangs' rooftop apartment, and while I did avoid the windows I could have handled them, but the tower was a different thing. It was by far the highest thing in Dise, and was even higher then we flew in the sky-waggon! That had nothing to do with my fear of heights (that I don't have), and much more due to the fact it was fucking high and anypony that wasn't a pegasus would be insane to go up that high, I mean for fuck's sake I felt sick looking at it.

Okay that last paragraph got away from me. What I was trying to say is that Screenshot took us through a short series of hallways passing right past the elevator doors. The walls were painted pink with grey stripes, and the doors lining the hallway seemed to have the names of various drugs on them. Mint-als, Party Time Mint-Als, Buck, Dash (I smacked Flare when he stopped too long looking at the door) and so forth. I could almost swear I heard talking and laughing behind more than one of them.

Eventually, we reached a plain wooden door labelled “G.M. Office.” After Screenshot knocked thrice, the door slid (very cool effect, mind you) open. Two of those creepy ass robots flanked the other side of the door, and, most concerningly, they had their wide array of guns and explosives out and armed. Apparently nopony was trusted. Across the room was the mare I had to assume was Granny Dynamite.

She was only a wrinkled green pony sitting in a wheel chair. Her mane was grey and falling out, and

she looked half asleep sitting there. However, I made sure to approach cautiously, as the earth pony had two belts of dynamite strapped across her body. Not counting, of course, the two in an X pattern on her flank.

Trotting over and noticing a lack of anyplace to sit, I took my place to Screenshot's right. "Granny Dynam-

"Stuff it." She sneered, and opened up her pale white eyes, "Call me Granny and cut that accent. I may be old, but I'm not deaf. I'm not blind either, no matter what you hear, so just spit it out. That prancing pony wanted me for something, heh. Wants my army. Heh. They all want it, well you can have em! Never done me no good. I'm kidding, of course. Well, stop standing there with your maws agape, speak!" I was more amazed at the way her neck flapped when she spoke than anything she had to say.

"Photo Finish sends her regards." Screenshot said, the accent thoroughly dropped.

"Photo Finish can only send her regards cause she got nothing else to send. Her mother was better than her and she's still a little girl tryin' a fit in her mother's boots. Well, what does she want? She can't give me anything so she must want to speak. Forever speaking, but she never says anything." How exactly a pony could speak without saying anything confused me.

Screenshot mercifully got to talking. She quickly and forcefully told the old mare what the Baises were planning, having to talk through the old mare's interruptions no less than three times.

"So you heard this straight from that mule's mouth?" She nodded at me, her eyes lids growing heavy again.

"Yes."

"Yes what?" She groaned a bit.

"Yes Ma'am."

For some reason, she face-hoofed. After she was finished with that, she leaned back in her wheel chair humming to herself. "You heard this too, my pretty young thing?" She nodded at Flare, who blushed hot red.

"Yes ma'am." His wings fidgeted noticeably under his dress, "Molly gave the plans herself. Plans to take over the Moon, Finisher puppet and all that, I guess you heard enough about but its all true."

"Yes... yes." She stared at me, or rather it seemed like she stared past me. For a split second I thought I saw static on the screen of the Ponitron behind me, but when I turned to look at it the normal face displayed. "Pay attention," the old mare said, snapping me back forward and the silly thought out of my head. "I don't trust you."

That was for the best. I was surprised the old mare had lasted as long as she had as the ruler of the Galicians, as it seemed gang leadership was a cut throat business, so I guessed distrusting all the ponies helped.

"No. You don't," Screenshot said simply, "but you can't not trust us. You want the peace right? If the Baises gain too much control, the city will erupt."

"Shush, you think you know this is this it? Heh. You're barely a filly. Is that a real cutie mark, or is it painted on, I can't tell. Listen to your elders: I remember when the NCA first came to Dise, I remember the fires and riots, so don't you talk to me about such things. I remember when your precious Parasite Mound was a raider cesspit leeching off the lifeblood of Dise. I KNOW war." The old mare was practically shaking as she spoke, "Do not presume to lecture me."

"I am not lecturing. I am tr-

The sound of Granny pulling a stick of dynamite off her belt shut Screenshot up. “Good. Listen to your elders.” She grinned, spitting it into her lap. “Good. Listen, what does it take to be listened too. Your bloody hulking mare, who looks awful in that dress may I add, is too dumb to lie. So she’s telling the truth, yes I get that. Heh. I can see why the Finishers would fear, nopony would suffer under Molly’s hoof for long. So that’s it. That’s why you came here, for my army. Well. What do you have to offer?”

“Peac-” Screenshot started.

“Stuff your peace under your tail. Heh.” She leaned forward in her chair and once again I thought I saw the Ponitron beside me display a burst of static. I didn’t look this time as it was clearly my imagination. “What I need,” she started again, “is a form of payment. Caps, deals, information. Something I can sink my teeth into.”

And then came the bartering. It made no sense why Granny would charge The Finishers to stop a battle neither of them wanted, but then again I was not a smart pony (and you’re probably tired of hearing me say that). If I knew the details I would give them, but I may have dozed off about five minutes into it. I was never much of a bargainer... barterer... talker-pony. Thing. Except on the occasion that I was.

“Alright.” The old mare snorted, making my shoot my eyes open. Totally not asleep or anything. “You can make use of my robots, heh. Tonight. Get that mule bitch to attack tonight, and I’ll have them ready to stop her. Midnight.”

“One.” I gritted my teeth, expecting a verbal lashing, but it was vitally important the raid take place after midnight. I didn’t want it to go off early while I was still under Mustang contract. “Make it one. Midnight is too early.”

“Whatever. One AM. Not like I have to be awake for it.” She leaned back in her chair and waved a hoof. “This better be a real thing. Do not presume to fuck with me, you got that? The Galicians do *not* like to be fucked with.”

“We got it. Thank you for your time.” Screenshot said turning around and rolling her eyes.

Me and Flare followed suit and he whispered hurriedly to me, “Can we change now?”

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“Tonight?”

I was surprised Molly even agreed to see me, since I got the feeling she didn’t like me. Still, I was sitting in Molly’s top floor office with a sly grin on my face, and noticeably less confined this time. I was moving up in the world.

“Yes,” I said, stretching just a bit. It felt so good to have that stupid dress off me, but I kept the sun glasses. Not there was any sun to shade, I just liked seeing everything in pink. And they matched my mane... dammit I wore a dress once and I was already thinking about how things matched. “Tonight. Roy, he’s having a party. In his pent house. Starts just past midnight.”

“Yes.” The mule put a hoof through her long mane, “Yes. You’re not as dumb as you look.” She smirked at me a bit. “You’re dumb, just not quite *that* dumb. I had plans to attack tonight anyway,” she said, fiddling with the drink on her desk as she, for some reason, stared at my purple leg. “You have the door unlocked, yes my little rat?”

“Uh.” Crap, I knew I was forgetting something. Quickly Silver, think of something smart. Dammit. Nervously I tapped my metal hoof on my pipbuck.

“Course.” Flare said hovering just above my head. He too seemed happy not to have his dress on, which is a shame. It did look so cute on him. “What you think we’re stupid, we got everything planned

and its going to be a blast. You like blasts, right?"

"Yes, my carrion crow," Molly said with a yawn. "It shall be glorious. You may be gone now. Assuming you aren't lying through your teeth, I will bother you no further. You aren't subtle, but you're effective."

With that compliment thingy, I started to turn when she added, "But, if you ever need more work hit me up. I usually prefer unicorns, but you seem resourceful enough. For a rat." Yup that was going to happen. In all honesty, my plans for after I finished that night consisted mostly of running as far away from Dise as I could and never looking back. Ever since I stepped foot into Parasite Mound, things had gone from bad to worse to worstest.

"We'll think about it, Miss Molly," Flare said as the door shut behind us. At least this morning was better than the night before. I could walk now without pain shooting into my brain, and I was no pony's patsy but my own. Well, I suppose the Finishers had some say, but their desires really coincided with mine so it was a win-win.

Walking down the hall of The Ale House, we soon found ourselves down the elevator and leaving the building (an orange pony with an overlarge cowpony hat waved to me, but I ignored him). We really didn't talk until we walked outside and I heard... something. Like a loud sound that was... I wasn't sure but it was above me.

Highlighted against the noon sky (overcast, as always) was a hulking black armoured sky waggon. I could barely see it from where I stood, but it looked to have two round ball things to either side that maybe powered it, and on the bottom was a row of what could only have been missile launchers. Seriously. I shit you not.

"A Vertibuck." Normally, I'd say something stupid like, 'the fuck is that?' but he finished his statement before I had the chance. "Like an armoured war vehicle. Stole three of 'em and a sky-tank when the Enclave splintered off, tried to take a raptor too, but... ." He shrugged. I just sort of stared at the thing as it flew past. It really was a beautiful sight, and I almost wanted to fly in one. Almost. "Yeah." Oh never mind Flare wasn't done talking after all. "The Enclave rents their usage out for a price." Welp, if I were ever feeling the urge to go hurtling through the skies hundred of meters above the ground in a rickety container, I'd know who to call.

After the beast flew off south, me and Flare went to walking back to The Moon for the final part of our plan. And when I say "final," I actually mean "the part we were supposed to do the night before but forgot to."

"So," Flare started. If I'd looked at him I may have noticed a subtle smirk forming on his lips. "You said the doctor took out some of your ribs, right?" Not really paying attention, I just nodded, until, of course, he flew right at my face stopping centimetres away. "Does that mean you can... ya know." He nodded down.

I wasn't following.

"Well," he rolled his eyes, "say you were to sit on your rump, and lean forward. Without your ribs I bet you could... ." I could what... ?

Wait.

Did he just suggest I... . My ears started to burn, and I could a hotness form on my cheeks. That fucking pervert. Only he would think of something like that. I glared straight at his eyes, and the second he realized I understood, he started laughing hysterically, and (unfortunately) flying out of my reach. Try as I might to leap and reach him, he just flew further away. Celestia damn those pegasi.

“Whats so funny? Oh, pretty glasses too.” I realized we had finally made it to The Moon. Looking down, I saw Serenity smiling back up at me, only she was wearing an adorable, poofy, pink-and-white dress with a pink bow in her hair.

“Nothing. What're you wearing?”

“Oh!” She squealed in delight. “You like it!” she said rearing up onto her hind legs, “Mustangs gave it to me to drum up business. Said I might as well put my talent to good use.” She did a little spin on one hoof before falling back on all fours and grinning up at me. “You like it?”

I thought for a second before replying. “How much does it cost?”

“Like your dress, Serenity,” Flare said swooping down from his skybound hiding place, saving me from having to deal with the consequences of my words. “Should have seen the one Hired had on earlier.” Aw shit, never mind, Flare's an ass.

Her eyes went wide and she immediately bounded up to me, “You wore a *dress!*?” She gaped up at me, “Can I see!? Pretty please!” Crap. I tried to squirm back only to bump into Flare blocking my escape route. “C’mon. It looked pretty right? You'd look beautiful.” The dress in my saddle bagged seemed to weight me down as she stopped for a second and sniffed the air. “Wait. Did you take a bath!? You smell clean for once!”

For once! Quickly, Silver, think of something more exciting than me wearing a dress.

“You should have seen Flare's,” I said, smiling down at the filly. And right away she was off, pouncing on Flare's wing.

Turning to them, I saw the pink unicorn hanging off one of Flare's feathers. “You were wearing a dress!? But you're a colt! Can I see it?” By the reddening of his cheeks, I safely concluded that I'd won this round. I let him have a minute of stammering before trotting over, lifting Serenity up by the hem of her dress, and throwing her over my back.

“He'll tell you later. Great story,” I said with a halfhearted smirk as I started walking towards the glorious water fountain of The Moon. “Right now we need to dis-”

“Is your leg is purple!” No it was silver, obviously. Wait, dammit. She hopped off my back and started poking at my metal leg, and I had to wonder how she missed it earlier. “Wow its pretty. Don't think it matches your mane though. Should'a painted it pink.”

“Serenity.” Blinking, she looked up to me and smiled. Finally I think I got her attention. Only Celestia above knew why she was so hyper. “Okay we ne-”

And she was off.

Some poor stallion was perusing in front of the water fountain, and had stopped a bit too long when Serenity pounced. “Hello mister.” She skipped up, a painfully fake smile plastered on her face. “Did'ja want to come in? We have a brunch special goin' on. A meal and a private dance, it's a bargain!”

“Uh.” The stallion looked around, taking a step back. “I'm just looking.”

“You don't want to?” She took the tinniest of steps forward. The stallion gulped a bit and shook his head. Without warning her grey eyes turned to the size of saucers and started to water just as her lower lip wibbled ever so slightly. “Aren't you gunna stay for brunch?”

Just like that the stallion looked left and then right trying to find a way out, before quickly galloping to two O's that made the entrance to The Moon.

“Inconceivable.” Flare said floating upside down beside me, “She's weaponized cuteness.” He turned

his head to me and stated flatly, "We're doomed."

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"They had party cannons!?" Gulping, I looked to Flare, but he just sort of smirked. "Like! Cannons! That shot parties." I gave Serenity the slightest of nods and she started squealing with delight. "That's so awesome! We need to go. I wanna ride one!"

"Uh." I gulped and looked around. "Maybe later." We had set up at a small section of The Moon bar with a lovely view of the main stage. I mean elevator. In case... somepony saw us. Yup. The fact that Myst, the most beautiful of all Mustang dancers, was current on the stage had nothing to do with it. "Now for the pl-

"Point of order," Flare said across the round table with his hoof raised. Considering he interrupted me I gathered he didn't care about what I actually thought so I just finished off the Sunrise Sarsaparilla bottle in front of me and shut the fuck up. Fizzy. "How come Hired makes all the plans?"

What? So surprised at the mutiny, I accidentally let the bottle drop out of my mouth and spill its remaining soda into a small puddle on the table.

Flare continued, "I mean, no offence, because if I gave offence you'd flatten me, but ever since I've known you you've been captured three times by three different gangs." His wings stuck out dramatically, "I mean, that can't be good."

"Three?" There was the Mustangs, then the Baises, and then... "The Finisher's don't count," I finished.

"Two's still a lot, Mommy." Serenity pipped up, standing on her chair still dressed in the outfit The Mustangs gave her.

"Serenity please do-" -n't call me mommy, I tried to say.

"She's right, Hired," Flare said, leaning back in his chair, his wings twitching a bit, "two is a lot. And that's since I've known you." He lifted his Sunrise Sarsaparilla to his lips with both hooves and drank deep and dramatically. "How many times before that, I have to wonder."

"Once at Timber!" Serenity bounced.

"Serenity!" She was not helping. At all.

"Didn't you say you got caught by those raiders too?" The ones I almost sold Serenity too. Yeah I'd tried to forget about that.

"Well its not that simple." I said between gritted teeth. This was just getting silly.

"Well, is that all? Never captured at all during your... 'mysterious,'" he moved his hooves in air quotes, "past." I opened my mouth as if to talk but shut it just as quick as I tried to think of a good enough lie. Nothing came to mind, and Flare spoke too fast anyway. "I Knew it!" He pointed his hoof. "Clearly we can't trust your planning skills."

"But Flare," Serenity pipped up. I could feel her magic flare up as she quickly levitated his half empty bottle of soda and moved it towards her side of the table, "If she did get caught so many times, then don't it also mean she escaped that many times too?" Taking a sip of Flare's soda she continued, "Then she gotta be good improvisational, right? So ain't that what ya want inna good leader?"

He just sort of blinked and shook his head.

"Also," I added, "I can kill you with my hoof." Flare gaped at me before turning to Serenity, and then back to me, and finally back to his soda which Serenity was busy drinking.

“Oh, whatever,” he crosses his forelegs, “But if we get caught. Or shot. Or shot then caught and then shot again we won’t be blaming the pegasus, got it!?” Yeah, yeah. Unless of course it was legitimately his fault, which is always a possibility.

“OK.” I sighed. “Now for my pla-”

The radio was suddenly blaring from the bar, cutting me off. Dammit. “...*The Batmare has said she is considering legal action against 'THE Batmane' a fighter in the Ale Pit,*” Fun fact: apparently the cage I fought in was called the Ale Pit. What was with this country and stupid names? “*The word is still out on who The Batmare is planning legal action through, as Dise has not had an active justice system for two hundred years.*” I really wanted to yell at the bartender to turn it down, but Mr New Haygas' voice was too beautiful, and his laugh too lovely.

*“In other news, the NCA Council convened an emergency session after yesterday’s Balefire massacre. According to my sources, the council has voted 7/3 for engaging in a counter attack against the Minotaurs, who are believed to be behind the attack.”* Serenity called to me but I rose my hoof to quiet her: this information was clearly important for anypony living near Dise. “*Since according to the NCA treaty all acts of aggression must have a 75% approval with the council the matter is now before the Council Chairman who is allowed, in the event of a split vote, to give a tie breaking vote. If such an action does go through the NCA and all its subsidiary cities will have declared war on the Minotaurs. The Chairman, for his part, has said he will decide his vote within the next few days.*”

After a burst of static a new voice played, obviously that of the council chairman (I have no idea what either of those two words mean). “*This... this is not a decision I take on gladly. My choice, to go to war, or to vie for peace, will have a grave impact on all Citizens within the NCA zone, and a grave impact on our trading partners, and truthfully, the wasteland as a whole. However, the actions taken against us, the NCA, and the brave mares and stallions of the South Canyon Camp, cannot be forgotten. The perpetrators will be punished, but we must, as an organization, make sure our actions punish those who are truly responsible. If, as some in this chamber believe, the minotaurs were not capable of such an attack then we must act with caution. We are not the savages of Equestria, who turned to blood and violence after a similar attack, without first knowing the facts. However, If the minotaurs have once again made an enemy of the NCA then we must act swiftly, and with great force, to ensure they are never again able to threaten any city or country who pledges to be one with the New Caledonian Alliance. I will make my decision in a few days, but only after I have seen all relevant facts. Thank you, and may Celestia watch over us all.*”

I was leaning back in my chair listening as the radio continued and Mr. New Haygas’ voice returned. “*For their part, the minotaurs have been completely silent about the attack. All attempts to reach them for comment have been ignored. Oh well, if they're so eager to be attacked, I’m sure the boys in blue will help them. Welp, that’s enough of the news. Sorry for boring you folks, back to the same ten songs we always play.*”

“So.” Serenity leaned over the table at me, “Can we hear the plan now?” She said with a simple smile.

Nodding, I remembered I totally was supposed to tell them both about my master plan. It was a really good one, too, “Okay so my plan-”

“Hired. What the fuck are you doing here?” Celestia hooffuck me. I turned to see Mayhem standing over me, a glare on his face, “The boss was looking for you.” Whatever. Fuck my plans.

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Sitting on one of Roy's many couches, I stared up at the glass skylight, waiting for Roy to admit me.

Above, the cloud layer swirled and swayed ever so slightly. It was hard not to wonder what was behind it. Sometimes cracks would appear and you could see the glimpse of blue and light, but it was rare. I stopped staring at the sky and looked around the huge apartment complex: it was useless to think about the impossible.

It wasn't long before I was called before Roy. Walking into the office, the blue unicorn seemed to be staring intently at the radio on his desk as it blared. "...*Steel Rain has claimed that unless the Mustangs break all tie with the Minotaurs, there will be serious repercussions.*" When he saw me, the radio clicked off and he said something I never expected.

"I never wanted this job, ya know." His voice was strangely thick, all his former arrogance lost. "My... friend Melancholy was supposed to. All I wanted was to serve him. To protect him. When I was supervising The Moon floor, Enclave assassins killed him and the former leader. The Baises hired them, the bitch Molly did it because when she made an advance on Melon, he called her an Ass." He stomped his hoof down on his desk with a sharp crack. I did the only thing I could do, which was sit down, shut up, and listen. "There was chaos. I took control because somepony had to. I just wanted to serve and I was forced to lead."

His head turned, glaring at the radio. "Those NCA fuckers hate me. They've set a hit out on me, and they think I don't know. Do you know why?"

"You sided with the minotaurs," I said, staring past him to the window facing the side alley outside.

"Hah!" he didn't particularly look like he found it funny. "They came marching up here and demanded a discount of my water supply. Demanded. I told them to fuck right the hell off. They stopped gambling at my casino and cut trades with me, so their water prices suddenly sky-rocketed"

"Your water?"

"Who do you think runs the fucking water-plant? Clean purified water and only three ponies know how it really works." He grinned at me, "What you thought we only had a single business? But yeah. They fucked me over, and after the fiasco at the power plant, I was forced to get help from the minotaurs. The Baises won't trade food with me. The NCA won't. Dammit." He stomped his hoof again. "My ponies need food. The NCA and Baises own the food though, and they work together to make sure no pony else can get a bite without their say so." he looked away from me. "I did what I had to. Hizai wont talk to me, Baises want my head, the NCA have hired mercenaries to kill me."

There was a long pause where nopony spoke.

"I wanted Melancholy, not his job..." he said under his breath. "Now I have the power. But I have to protect my ponies. I thought the power plant would give me an edge, bring the Mustangs back." He shook his head. "Mayhem convinced me. I shouldn't have listened. We're weaker than ever." He looked up to me with deep eyes, almost as if he was about to cry. "I have so few ponies loyal to me. So few options. But... but I have to protect my little ponies, I have to defend my family. Fuck, I never wanted this job, but its mine so I have to protect them." For a second, I thought I saw something, but I must have been mistaken. There was no way he was crying.

For some reason I felt sorry for him. Do not get me wrong, he was a horrible pony that did stupid and evil things, but I felt sorry for him, and for what I was going to do to him. That was, until I remembered what he told me the night before. What he'd do to Serenity.

Fuck him.

"What? Got nothing to say? Good. Keep it to yourself bitch." He sat back up straight and shot me a glare, his good old arrogance returning. "So you got news for me? Speak, bitch! I have shit'ta do that

don't involve ugly mares." I think he was overcompensating for having emotions.

"Molly thinks I did it. Plans to attack the tunnels. Didn't tell me when." He grinned, bobbing his head as I spoke. You'd think he actually did the work himself. "My payment?"

"In your room. You ain't half bad, bitch. More subtle than I expected. Maybe there is a brain inside that thick skull of yours." He shrugged and leaned back in his chair levitating a glass to his lips. "You can stay though, with full pay. That's if you want it." I shook my head. "Well. Speak up, bitch. Why won't you accept my offer?"

"Honestly?" He nodded his tiny squish-able head. "Since I got to this city. This city has fucked me over. I plan to leave. For a long time."

Laughing, he nodded. "Can't say I blame ya. You're a beacon for trouble, but fuck it. You ever come around these parts again and you and your filly can work for me." he pointed to the door. "You've done your job. As of now, you are no longer a Mustang. You can stay the night, but you don't gotta. Try not to get a bullet in the brain and get the fuck out of my office."

Happily, I obliged.

Only to find Mayhem waiting by the stairs for me. Great, that's exactly what I wanted. I mostly ignored him as I trotted down the spiral stair case, and he mostly ignored me as he followed. That was until we reached the bottom and he started talking.

"What was he going on about?"

"Nothing," I said as I kept walking down the hall, adding, "Don't eaves drop."

"Me?" He gave me his usual slick smile. "I would never. Now I was just surprised he would talk to you so candidly." Wasn't that, in itself, an admission of eaves dropping? Whatever. "So what did he tell you?"

"Nothing." The elevator door slid open. I tried really hard to press the close door button before he could get in, but he was far too quick.

"Oh? He tends to talk a lot of nothing when he worries." the red pony leaned against the elevator wall as it started descending. "He worries too much. Hasn't stepped a foot outside his apartments since he got the job, in fear of an assassin."

"Can't blame him." Not after what happened to the last Mustang leader and whoever Melancholy was. "Why do you care?"

The pony shrugged, but grinned just a little bit. "Baisses are coming. Don't know when." I did. "Don't know where." I knew that too. "But they're coming. I like to know where my fearless leader stands, ya dig?" Yeah I dug. I mean, understood. "Sometimes I wonder if he's the right stallion for the job."

Oh, now that was interesting.

Or would have been if I was still part of their little gang. But I was free, I'd filled my contract to the letter and was no longer obliged to give a fuck about their petty squabbles. The elevator doors slid open and I walked out, not bothering to answer or acknowledge his treason. I had bigger thoughts in my head than Mayhem.

Namely my gun.

My brand spanking new fucking gun. Roy'd said it was in my room, and I was nearly salivating as I stormed down the hallway. Some pony stopped to say hi, but I couldn't remember who it was, or anything about the encounter. The gun was just that much more important. I needed it, I pinned for it. I

got my ass kicked from one side of Dise to the other for that fucking gun.

I kicked the door open with a slam. There it was, with its glossy sheen. In Flare's forelegs.

Wait.

He was floating there, pleasant as could be, with my brand new gun resting on his forelegs. His eyes were wide as he stared at it, and I could almost hear his gasps of delight. "My Gun! Hooves off!"

Gasping, Flare looked up and let go of the gun. It fell. Fuck. I screamed. "NO!"

---

Okay, so the gun landed on the bed, and I may have overreacted. Of course, I'd lost so many good guns since walking south of Marefort, it was a touchy issue. Between them being stolen, broken, lost, and used as bludgeons, I was basically a gun pariah.

After extensive modifications to my battle-saddle, I got the thing up and ready. It was excessively large, and weighed me down so much on my right side we had to add weights to the left to make it feel more even. After that, it was completely required for me to go out and show off my amazing-ass gun. First however, I managed to (finally) sell off the drugs I stole from Flare to the Mustangs. The only exception was a single tin of mint-als that Flare insisted would come in handy. After the way he almost cried when I sold the dash, I could hardly say no, so I stuck them deep in my saddle bags beneath my dress.

Then it was shopping time!

It was also a perfect chance to venture into a part of the city I had yet to explore, and look over possible escape routes. We walked south from The Moon to the statue that served as a cross roads that dissected the city into mostly four quadrants. If you travelled east on the east/west road you'd soon find yourself in what Flare had called 'the worst part of town.'

It didn't look nearly as bad as Parasite Mound. Once you got into the heart of the suburb, you found a slum that consisted of jumbled together shacks made from scavenged metal, and gutted, barely-repaired old buildings. It was a close, and cramped jumble of streets with the only open areas being the array of merchant stands that always flanked around the stone water fountains. Unlike most everything else in the slum, the fountains looked fairly new, and when I leaned closer I saw each bared a plaque stating, "Property of the Mustangs. Take what you need."

"The Mustangs charge a flat tax of everypony living in the slums," Flare said beside me, floating upside down above the mess of ponies that swarmed the street. "They collect on every house once a month."

"Oh." I'd thought for a second it was a charity, but that was a laughable. This was Dise, baby, and nothing in Dise was free.

Flare shrugged and landed in front of me where there was a clear spot. "Of course there are some who can't pay." I bet they got shot up. "Roy lets them be." Wait really? "Hard to believe right? I didn't either but The Mustangs just go and leave them. Don't get me wrong, they're slaving shitheads only looking out for the bottom cap, but on this they ain't so bad in this." There was a pause. "oh. We need grenades too." Flare said zipping off to a nearby stand, "And maybe a remote mine..." I raised an eyebrow at him. "What! They're useful!"

I smiled for a second at the water fountain and pushed forward. "Serenity sure is quiet," I said as we passed below a bridge connecting a pair of two-story huts. Can huts have two stories?

Flare nickered, "I think she has a headache." He nudged his head, and I turned to see Serenity leaning off the side of my back poking at my new gun. Her horn was glowing brightly (normally my shoulder

would have informed me of her magic, but Dise was so over-saturated with magic I couldn't pick up individuals) casting her whole head in a light pink glow. It was true that the slum was loud (really really loud), but I think she was over-playing it.

“She'll wear herself out.” I sighed, and continued my trek circling around a stick skinny pony begging for caps. My memory was back in the Alehouse where Serenity over used her magic and... you know the rest. I'd heard stories of unicorns over taxing themselves and having their magic implode and fizzle out. Forever.

“Don't be an over-protective mother.”

“She's not my-” I shot him a glare as he nickered. “Whatever. I have a question.” He raised an eyebrow at me. “If say. We needed to escape. Quickly. What would you suggest?”

“Well.” He looked around to make sure no pony was listening. “There's a tunnel under the eastern wall. Dunno if any pony uses it now. Used to be for smuggling, way back when things were illegal. Hear the tunnel is still there, but locked. Scary rumours of ghosts and demons haunting it! OooooOoooo.” He waved his arms stupidly at my face, and I smacked them away. “I can lead you to 'em and through 'em of course. Why? Got plans to leave the city inna hurry, is that it?” No comment.

“Oh look,” I said dully as we reached another market area, “bullets.”

I trotted ahead to the small wooden stand with cases of bullets aligned neatly in a row. The tall teal earth pony behind it practically lit up when he realized I had no intentions to rob him. Grinning amiably, he quickly laid out a row of .50 calibre rounds upon my request. Not bothering to inspect them, I shoved them into my saddle bag (actually Serenity did that when she noticed what was going on) as the stand owners small radio blared music.

“Would you like anything, little filly?” the teal pony asked Serenity, who was half-lying on top of my head to see the stallion's few wares. “How about a sugar bomb?” Giving a filly sugar. What exactly did that stallion have against me? Serenity nodded and floated the sugary treat into her mouth with a crunch before I had a chance to voice my complaint.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, looking around the small semi circle of stands and the largest wall of buildings leaning in on the clearing. Small paths zigzagged through the slums, leading every which way. It made me feel a bit nostalgic and reminded me of my filly days running around the maze that was Marefort, searching for adventure. Shaking my head, I turned back to the teal stallion. “We need... food and travel supplies.”

“Course. I have a little.” His head disappeared behind his little stand.

I could barely hear his radio over the din. From what I could hear, it seemed like the group 'Celestia's Vision' heard of a group of... something deep in the eastern mountains and had a militant group march up there to kick them out. Something about something in somewhere. The gist seemed to be that Celestia's Vision decided to pick a fight out east.

Not that I really cared. Fuck, I hated those guys. If you don't remember who they were, they were the ones who hated Cyborgs for being deviant of Celestia's vision. Get it?

“Also,” I said to the pony, my eyes still scanning the maze. It was about then I realized I was lost, “how do I get back to the cross?”

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“...No shit, there I was!” Flare said, zooming in a circle. It had been a long day and I was glad to be able to lie down. “They tried to gun me and sail down, but we were too quick. Sail layed down cover fire, KTCKTCHKTCH!” Resting my head on my fore legs, figured that guns didn't really make that

sound, but his performance was energetic enough for me not to complain.

“Then what happened?” He was going to tell me anyway, so I decided to humour him. Not that there was anything else left to do but wait. We had left The Moon with all our equipment a few hours earlier and proceeded to move, well, to the building next door. Everything was coming together soon but I kept feeling like I was missing something.

We were in a small four story office building that I had to kick my way into. It was dank and dusty, but it would serve what I needed it for, so I'd made our group traverse the maze of cubical debris. The stairs were broken, but Flare and I managed to drag enough debris to get to the second story. Luckily, that floor was all but empty, and the stairs to the top floor were all intact enough for me and Serenity to use. Blah blah blah, we got to the room we were currently in.

I think it had been used as a shelter before, given that in a corner there was a dirty mattress (that I was currently lying on. I had to work off the bath somehow). “Anyway,” Flare said as my eyes were drawn out the window towards the wall of The Moon, “so while Sail was covering me, I loaded up my Bunker Buster-.”

“Your what?” I interrupted, looking up at where the ceiling of the building should have been. Instead there was a huge gaping hole revealing the night sky, and a few stories above me, the glass walls of Roy Mustang's penthouse.

“Bunker Buster.” He gasped for a second before digging through his bags and pulling out the strangest battle saddle I'd ever seen. The whole thing was modified so the weapons would rest on his shoulders instead of his sides, and the duel grenade rifles had curved barrels to seemingly shoot the grenades down. “Fly over and lay down explosives. Made this baby myself. So I call her Bunker Buster! You should name your gun something awesome. All the best weapons have names.” Not bloody likely.

“Impressive.” Though I didn't sound impressed, I really was. Until then, I'd seen Flare mostly as a semi-useful hyperactive annoyance, but this quickly bumped him up to a mostly-useful hyperactive annoyance.

“So. They were running away like some crazy fuckers on dash.” I had the feeling he had first-hoof experience. “Anyway, needless to say the Steel Rangers fucked off a bit after that, and that! Is how I got promoted to Captain.” He petted his battle saddle fondly. “They took her away from me when I was kicked out, but let me have it back on the condition I don't blow up anymore computer labs.” Seemed like a fair deal.

Flare opened his mouth to start another story, but I lifted my pipbuck to silence him. I heard voices. Rising from the dirt-stained mattress, I started to move towards the window only to feel something tugging on my tail.

Turning my head, I had to smile just a tiny bit. Serenity had falling fast asleep on the mattress with her legs wrapped around my tail like it was a pillow. Reluctantly, I nudged her off and quickly dug into my saddle bag to drape the scarf that came with Flare's dress over her. Then I made my way back over the window and looked down four stories below.

That was a lie. I did look down, but it took me a few tries, and a shot of Med-X to calm my nerves. Did I mention I bought Med-X?

Below, a gaggle of ponies stood half-hidden in shadows, and talked beside a small door to the moon. A small door. Fuck. “Flare.” He looked down at me from his perch on the broken roof. “Did we unlock the door?” That's all the Baises asked of us, and we completely fucking forgot. A glance down at my pipbuck told me it was 12:57. Not enough time to fix it. Molly was going to be so very pissed.

Looking back down (why did earth ponies need to build tall buildings?) I saw one of the ponies had something in their fetlock. About the locked door, no doubt. I flicked the scope up over my eye to get a better look at the goings on. The pony that spoke into his hoof dropped... something.

Wait, why were they all backing up and taking cover?

BOOM!

Light blinded me and I had to jerk my head back, pulling my eyes away from the scope. Behind me, I could barely hear Serenity groaning over the sound of my ears ringing. And this was from the gang that called me unsubtle!

Taking a second, I grabbed a bounty notice. Back in Timber, Lucky had given me a warrant. I'd never planned to use it, but I was given the perfect chance with this attack, so I had to take it.

I looked back down at the carnage. The Baises charged forward through the burning hole, only to find a flurry of bullets to greet them. Through the smoke, I could spot a large red pony grinning under his hat as the huge mini-gun on his back spun up again. Still no sign of my mark though.

A purple mare took charge of the Baises, and I could see her shouting orders over the gun shots. The Baises retreated back down the Alley, throwing debris in their path as cover. Just in time for The Mustang horde to emerge. I recognized faces and the knew them to be no fighters. Myst stood trembling under the weight of her guns, (much heavier than stripper clothing) and the bartender stood beside Mayhem, a confident smile on his face as more ponies emerged.

“Whats going on-” Serenity leaned over the window, just in time to see a stripper named Mayflower take a bullet to the knee.

“Serenity!” I pushed her back as she squeaked and covered her eyes with her hoof. Dammit, she was supposed to be asleep. She wasn't supposed to see the slaughter. “Flare,” I pleaded, “watch her.”

No matter what happened, I still had work to do and a mark to take out. Looking back down my scope, I saw Mayflower's bloody corpse lying on the pavement as the rest of the Mustangs charged forward. They were no match for the Biases though, and nearly a dozen fell before Mayhem ordered them back into The Moon. My scope scanned the area bobbing and weaving, but still I couldn't find them.

The large stallion laid down cover fire with his mini-gun as the Mustangs fell back into the burning wreckage of the door. Until he ran out of ammo. He kept his confident smirk, but when I zoomed in on his eyes I saw the slightest tinge of dread. I didn't see the bullet that hit him, but blood splattered out of his knee, painting the ground.

Following the trajectory, I saw the purple mare standing above her group, a smoking rifle on her back. With a smirk and a tug on her hat she shouted something I couldn't hear. The Baises charged The Moon's side door as Mayhem limped backwards.

An orange pony with an overlarge cowpony hat charged ahead of Molly. I felt like a fly on the wall as I saw him foolishly rush Mayhem. Even injured and limping, Mayhem made short work of the pony; dodging his gunshot and kicking out his leg where he proceeded to crush his skull. In my mind, it was me crushing the pony, and my metal hoof was dripping with blood and brains.

I felt a tinge of regret at the battle, for it was I who caused it. More or less.

Then the little pony in my head said: *survive*.

No matter what I did, these two gangs were going to have at it. I just gave them a time, a place, and a chance. Now, Serenity sniffing into Flare's wing behind me was entirely my fault.

Two things happened at once. First, down on the ground a whirl of missiles and an explosion rocked

the alley. Without warning, a dozen Ponitrons flanked either side of the street where the battle was taking place, their many guns out and aimed. Bullets were traded as the Ponitrons move in. Sparks lit up their chests from the shots, but they barely seemed to notice as they rolled slowly, ominously forward. The Mustangs had a fighting chance. Only if it hadn't been for the second thing.

"Look!" Flare shouted, turning I saw him holding Serenity with one leg and pointing to the sky with the other. Following his hoof, I saw something black floating in the sky. The Vertibuck slowed to a stop over Roy's penthouse. I looked up through my scope just in time to see Molly grabbing onto a rope and descending out of view with half a dozen black clad ponies following her.

"Bitch!" My hoof struck out in anger, punching a chunk of the wall into the street. "She lied to me." She was never supposed to be here. Just attack The Moon and fight up, she never said anything about hiring the Enclave, or... of course she'd lied to me. She never did trust me. This whole battle was a distraction, and all I had to do was give Roy something else but the sky to focus on. "Fuck. It didn't matter. "

"What?" Flare had left Serenity on the bed to zoom into the air for a better view.

"If I told! If I told Roy or not. It was all a distraction. To kill him."

"No." Flare had, at some point, equipped Bunker Buster. "She ain't gunna kill him! She wants to capture him." Confusion must have been evident on my face. "To capture! Roy is the only pony she can be sure knows how to work the water plant. She wants his resources, not his head!"

Fuck. I turned back and scoped up my new gun. Below, the remaining Baises had surrendered and were surrounded by the Ponitrons as they whimpered and sobbed. Mayhem limped over to kick the nearest Baise in the head with a crack, and then laugh before falling over.

Back to the air, I could barely see anything from my angle. I saw bullets fly and glass shatter raining onto the street below. There was a bright light, and the thudding of an explosion hit my chest. Coughing, I stared at one window that remained untouched. It was Roy's office.

There he was; leaning with his back against the window with his white fur coat still on his shoulders and his horn glowing brightly. He was planing on an epic last stand no doubt, but Molly had different plans. Suddenly smoke started filling the room, but I could still see Roy's back pressed against the glass.

"Hey Flare," I said taking a deep breath, my scope hovering over the Vertibuck, "I think I have a name for my gun."

"What, is this really the time!?" He screeched as my vision bobbed. Serenity, for her part, trotted to my side and rubbed her head against my good leg.

"Yeah." I took the shot.

My gun roared like thunder. Blood splattered as the bullet tore through both glass, and Roy. The shards turned into rain and spun towards the alley below, falling along side his bloody and broken body. Spinning through the darkness, he landed with a splat beside the Ponitrons. Everypony gasped, save for the Ponitrons who stood completely still. Ever so slowly, his white fur coat floated down from The Moon, and rested on his corpse. A more fitting shroud, I could not think of.

Molly leaned out of the shattered window, gaping at the remains of Roy Mustang as I smiled. The bounty I had been offered was complete. A simple form offering more caps than I could imagine, all for the death of one Roy Mustang. Consorter with Minotaurs, and enemy of the NCA. So signed Major Lucky.

Grinning, I wrapped my fetlock around Serenity and turned to Flare. I inclined my head ever so slightly

towards my new .50 calibre gun, and gave it a name, "Subtlety."

Footnote!: Level up!

New perk! MOA Agent: Gain additional 35% accuracy with battle-saddle weapons.

((A/N: A special thanks so much to kkat for creating this world, and doing that awesome shit she does. And a super special thanks to my editor theBSDude who I forced to up into the wee hours of the morning to finish this. ~No One~))

## *Chapter 10: Darkest Before Dawn*

*“Hope is what makes us strong. It is why we are here. It is what we fight with when all else is lost.”*

Shots rang out in the night.

As I huddled behind a flimsy piece of plywood, my daring escape collapsed around my ears. Mere minutes after the assassination, we were greeted by a red unicorn with a blue mane who had identified himself as Starscream. Oh yeah, and he had bitchin' cybernetic wings. He informed us that he was a liaison of Mr. House and I, along with my companions, were in some serious shit. Molly, you see, did not quite like me going back on my deal (in my eyes I broke no contract as it was a legitimate error on my part. I had fully intended to unlock the door... but she was not like to listen) and now had plans to death-murder me.

Whoops.

All this was made painfully clear when we tried to escape the city through the tunnel Flare had told me about that afternoon. We made it all the way to the statue in the centre of the city, we were even were able to get east into the slums before we were set upon. And shot. A lot.

“I've faced worse,” I said, huddling Serenity to my chest as shots blared out somewhere in the slums. Hiding behind a small wall in what appeared to be an abandoned house, and I use house in the sense that somepony lived there and nothing more, as it was smaller than my room at the Moon and consisted of a dirt floor and three walls. Safer than the street though.

“Yeah?” Serenity looked up at me. There was fear in her eyes, plain as day, but I knew she was trying her hardest. Being shot at was not for foals, and I knew well enough this was hardly her first time. Though the details were sketchy, at some point she had been captured and chained by ponies similar to our assailants, and I was determined not to let that happen again.

“Yeah.” A story came to my head, and I started speaking before I started thinking. “Less then a year ago. In my old town. We were set upon by raiders in the night. Ten times as many as now.” Her wide eyes looked at me and nodded. “Most of the town was captured in their sleep. Save for me and three fillies.”

“W-what happened?”

“We won. Beat the raiders. Saved them all.” Not all of them, but I could hardly speak of that. My chest tightened and I knew it was the worst story I could have told, because it had no happy ending. But it was a story, it was something not here, and she didn't know about the rope or death or any of that.

She smiled and nodded as the gunfire stopped. The story, for what it's worth, did the trick at least. So when it came down to it, I could never claim nothing good came of it.

Peeking out into the black maze, I saw nothing. When we had entered the slums, there were tiny lights in between cracks and through broken and boarded up windows. Now the lights were snuffed and voices silent. Was this a ritual perhaps? Shootings and fights were not uncommon in the slums, and no doubt every pony already knew to lie down and shut up when the bullets started to fly.

“Hey!” Flare glided down from a hole in the roof, landing gently before us with Bunker Buster resting on his shoulders. “Looks like we have fifteen or so on our tail.” Not so bad. “Some of them are heavily armoured, and I saw at least one with a minigun.” Fuck. I looked down at my bare chest and wondered

why I hadn't gotten 'round to buying, you know, barding. Not to speak of the minigun, I saw what Mayhem did with one of those and I was not eager to be on the receiving end.

You know after killing Roy I'd expected the Mustangs to be out for my blood, not the Baises.

“We should be able to-Watch out!” We should be able to what?

“Gotcha,” somepony said.

Suddenly something cold and sharp was on my neck. Without thinking (shocking, I know), I grabbed the foreleg with both hooves and threw it with all my strength. The deep brown pony flew across the room crashing into the far wall. Serenity gasped as I realized that on its fetlocks was a pipbuck-like device, but instead of magical science it came with a retractable blade. I had just come really close to dying.

Leaving Serenity for a second, I trotted over to the groaning brown earth pony and cracked his skull with my pipbuck. I lowered my glare as I turned to Flare. “Take him somewhere.”

“Got it.” In a streak of blue, Flare grabbed the pony with his forelegs and burst up through the ceiling, taking special care to crack the brown ponies' head on the way out. A few seconds of steely silence later, there was a sudden shriek, and a dull thud. Following shortly after were shouts far to my right. Licking my lips, I helped Serenity onto my back.

“Be strong,” I offered, “and be quiet.” Serenity, to her eternal credit, narrowed her eyes and nodded.

I burst through the half-rotten door into the dark maze. The only light was the amber glow from my pipbuck illuminating the walls and stands around me, making the whole area dance with shadows. Above there was darkness, and beyond the glow of my pipbuck I could see nothing. My stomach tied itself into knots as I tried to remember the way to the tunnel. Behind me were the lights of Dise, so I must have been going vaguely in the right direction, but beyond that I wasn't sure.

Gunfire renewed my conviction, and I took off.

Shadows whipped past me as the rhythm of my hoofbeats overtook the sound of my heartbeat. That is to say, got very fast. Galloping, I crashed through a wall I didn't see until it was too late. Wood shattered into splinters and washed over me and Serenity, who squeaked but kept remarkably quiet. Inside the building, I took three steps, leapt over a terrified teal earth pony and his family, and smashed through a boarded up window head first.

Landing back on the slum streets, I barely broke stride, though my head hurt like a week of binge drinking. No time to worry about such silly things like brain damage though, as I started to hear hoof steps catching up on me. I weaved left around empty food stands, and quickly splashed my way through one of the many water fountains.

“Found her!” Fuck. Somepony was talking about me. “Follow the light!” Fuck again. I kept galloping as I glared down at my stupid shiny pipbuck. They were useful for radio and maps and stuff, but it being all glow-y was going to get me shot.

There was a shadow following me. Across from me in another street. As I galloped, the gaps in the walls and building that separated us showed glimpses of my stalker. What was worse was that the two streets seemed to be getting closer together. I kept running though, and did my best to get ahead of my shadow. “Close your eyes,” I whispered to Serenity, before turning and jumping.

Crashing through the wall that separated the two streets I landed on my feet and spun towards my shadow. Subtlety roared. My shadow was torn from her feet and sent spinning in a bloody mess from the shot. Behind her was a row of broken and shattered walls. Everything Subtlety touched turned to scrap, and I loved it. I turned my head back to nudge Serenity.

“I-I'm fine, we just need to-Watch out!” Not again, dammit.

My head snapped back the way the shadow came from to see four more ponies running two by two at me. I bit down on my bridle. This was nothing that couldn't be handled by a little tact and Subtlety.

BOOM

Argh, blinding light. The explosion hit my chest like a sledge hammer. Serenity cried out as the smoke cleared and the two ponies were gone. Buried and broken under a pile of rubble and stone that the explosion had turned the street into. Looking into the sky, I saw a glimpse of blue and red. Damn, that Bunker Buster was a beauty.

Suddenly weapons had names, that made perfect sense.

Thanking Celestia I had been far enough away from the explosion to avoid most of the shrapnel (I could feel a few scratches, but nothing so bad as a spike in the chest), I turned and kept up my desperate run through dangerous territory, wondering just how many more things were going to explode near me.

The answer was one.

Serenity saw the grenade before I did. Her pink magic illuminated it long enough for me to kick it away. The blast sent me face first into the ground and Serenity sprawling off me back through the dirt, and into an empty stand with the word 'apples' painted across it. Groaning I scrambled to my hooves and coughed out a metaphorical lung.

“Serenity.” I called out to her. Her small pink body twitched and I nearly lost my lunch. Until her head lifted ever so slowly, and she smiled dimly at me. “You alright?” She started to nod.

And stopped halfway. Her grey eyes went wide as a rifle pressed up against the back of her head, casting her in a green glow. A similarly-coloured unicorn emerged from the shadows, grinning sadistically.

Fuck.

Overhead I could barely make out the form of Flare flying. He must have seen the amber light of my pipbuck as he did not fire. Not that it helped any, from all sides I heard shouts of confirmations, and ponies merging from all sides. The glow of their horns illuminated the small market. Blackened wood and debris covered half of it, and the other half was ruffled by the grenades impact. No less than eight ponies surrounded me, and I did not trust Subtlety to be able take them all out without hurting Serenity.

“Well, well, well.” Fuck that voice. “A rat caught in a trap. Poetic, is it not?” Molly said, walking out of the blackness, her hat tipped over her eyes. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you've caused me?” She stomped her hoof and glared at me, at least I assumed she glared, not being able to see her eyes and all.

“A lot?” I ventured.

“You have no fucking idea. Turns out the Mustang bugs are poisonous. Or rather their friends are. I have to wonder how exactly the Galicians knew when we were going to attack. If I recall that plan was changed last minute under your information. Funny. Don't you think, my little rat?” Actually I found that not funny at all, nor did I find her firing a shot a centimetre from my hoof funny. I really didn't care though, as I was using all my focus keeping eye contact with Serenity as she whimpered with the gun pressed to her skull.

“Hilarious.”

“Tell me,” she turned and pointed her gun at Serenity, “what would you do if I kept my promise? Killed

your little bitch. I gave you the chance, I offered you a job and you were... well a rat.” Her voice barely concealed her rage. “First you fail to do the one thing I ask, and now the remnants are claiming they have to break contract. They claim they cannot kill one of their own. So I have to chase you through these slums, and you just refused to sit still. How many ponies have died tonight because of you? Because you failed. To. Listen.”

“Not enough.”

Something hit the ground with a “plink” and a “tiss.”

I started coughing from the stench before I realized what had happened. Smoke, smoke was everywhere so suddenly and so thick I couldn't even see my hoof in front of my face. Coughing more, I heard the sound of a hoof strike. A vague shape was hitting another to my right, but it vanished a second later and was fighting a pony at my left before quickly vanishing in a burst of magic (my shoulder confirmed that) and hitting yet a third pony. It was disorienting. I didn't waste a second and counted on the green mare to be the same place I left her. Subtlety roared, and I heard it slam through somepony with a screech. There was a tingling sensation in my shoulder, and somehow I knew it belonged to Serenity. Running forward through the choking smoke I lifted Serenity to my back, and got the fuck out of there as fast as possible.

The streets were as dark as ever as we suddenly continued the same way we had before. As we ran Serenity shouted into my ear. “What was she talking about.”

“Forgot.” I grunted, spinning around a sleeping bum who somehow remained unawakened by the battle. “About the door.”

“Nuh uh.” I skidded to a stop just so I could turn and give her my patented, 'what the fuck' face. She continued, “I unlocked the door. Like, when you were off doing whatever it is you do, I unlocked it as soon as I got up.” Then why the fuck was it locked? Oh well, it meant I hadn't broken a contract even by accident. No clause in my contract to say it remain closed, so I was basically in the clear.

“Thanks,” I said, looking around. Just in front of us was a large ratted shack leaning against the Dise wall. At the top of the wall I could see hints of lights, and almost the vague silhouettes of ponies patrolling it. Not oblivious to the fighting inside the city, just instructed to ignore it. “We're almost there.”

I started towards the shake when a dark figure suddenly jumped before me from a nearby rooftop, gliding to the ground with a cape that looked eerily similar to a bat's wings. I readied Subtlety before I realized the pony was unarmed.

“Are you unharmed?” The mare was decked in an outfit of navy blue and purple with a deep black bat-cape and a mask (that did nothing to hide her horn) that seemed to make her ears stick up like a, you guessed it, bat.

“Yeah.” I stuttered before turning to Serenity to confirm. She nodded ever so slightly, and thus I returned to our caped crusader. “We're good... thanks.”

“Worry not, citizen. It is all in a day's of work for THE Batmare.” She puffed her chest out and brought a hoof to it as a sudden wind blew her cape dramatically. “Be more careful. The forces of evil ar-” A chilling laughing reverberated throughout the slum. “By Wallkirk's ghost!” She turned dramatically to the side. “The Laughing Stallion! You will not escape, scum!” Suddenly she vanished in a flash of light, leaving us wondering what the fuck had just happened.

“Are you coming?” Flare asked, suddenly hovering above us, his red jump suit torn. You know, he had worn that thing since I met him, but I'd never realized. He just never took it off so it seemed like a part

of him, and passed right over my vision. Until it was torn, that was, then it stood out like a sore thumb.

“Did you see that!” Serenity asked, planting her fore legs on my head and pushing my mane into my eyes. “That was a superhero! A real live superhero! It was so cool! She saved us.”

“I saved you,” Flare said, spinning upside down to smirk at us. “I saw her patrolling and told her civilians were being mugged. Hell, I even carried her over.” He flipped back, landing on the ground. “Basically you owe me.” Now that was a change.

“Fine.” I started towards the shack when I heard shouting behind me. Dammit, why couldn't they just take the hint! “Run!” I shouted, galloping as fast as my legs could take me. Slamming into the door full force with my shoulder (ouch), I tumbled through the other side in front of a trap door.

Good thing for this convenient trap door. Mind you considering the massive tunnel system in Dise it wasn't that lucky. Especially if it actually was haunted. Hah.

“Flare.” I called out poking at the chains locking the door.

Zippering over he kicked the chains away, “Already took care of it when you folk were running. Earth ponies are slow.”

“Funny,” I said, helping Serenity off my back. “Should have been watching our backs.”

“I did!” Flare protested. “Saved your ass with a perfectly timed superhero.” Serenity squeaked something but I didn't hear.

“Right. We shouldn't have been caught in the first place.” I said, as Serenity squeaked again.

“Well if you would have run fa-”

“The Door!” Serenity screamed. With a kick the door slammed shut and I smiled at Serenity. She just sighed and walked away.

“Flare.” He beamed at me. “You're right. Get the thing.” With a laugh he reached into my bag and set something up in front of the door.

Opening the trap door, I beckoned Serenity and Flare down the stairs it opened to, and started walking down myself when the door swung open. “Finally!” Molly growled stomping in. “Trying to scurry little rat. Do you really think you can escape?”

“Dunno.” I took a tentative step down the trap door stairs into the tunnel. “Do you think you can? Ass.”

Beep.

Looking down, she saw the remote mine at her feet.

“Shit!” She turned to her gang that was still rushing in. “Out, out, get out!”

BOOM.

---

Okay. So maybe waiting until the last second before getting out of there was not the best idea.

The shockwave sent me spiralling down the stairs in a heap, just in front of the rubble mind you. Despite my stupid last minute decision for an epic one liner, the explosion worked well in three ways. Firstly: it blocked off the route in case they felt like following us. Even if they wanted too it'd be difficult, Second: it may have incapacitated or killed Molly, and her gang (not killed -- she was going to come back to bite me in the flank), and thirdly: it proved just how badass we could be.

On the other hoof, it proved Flare right, as he insisted that we buy the mine earlier that day. That could

set a dangerous precedent.

I stood up in the dark. "Everypony alright?"

Serenity's horn lit up, and with it I could see the pale figure of Flare standing up. "I'm okiey dokiey." Serenity said as Flare nodded an affirmative. I tried to get a grasp of the situation. The tunnel was similar to the one under Parasite Mound, but it lacked a few key things. Mostly, it was completely dark, devoid of the pale lighting from the other tunnel, as well the floor was concrete instead of grating, implying that this was a side tunnel, not the main tunnel. Most importantly, however was the fact this tunnel was much worse-kept. I had previously thought that was impossible.

Also, my pipbuck light! It was not on.

For fuck's sake. I broke my pipbuck. When I bought the damn thing, the trader claimed nothing short of a direct lightning strike would deactivate it. Figures, the amber light nearly got me killed outside, and now when I needed it, it was completely borked. I brought the stupid thing to eye level I tried to fix, but of course I couldn't see shit in the darkness. Thus, my fixing consisted of my smashing at it with my cyber leg.

"Stop it," Flare scolded. I looked up at him and rolled my eyes before starting to smash at it some more. This worked to solve its clicking problem before. Logically, it had to work this time too. "Idiot. You really have no idea what you're doing do you? Its so bloody simple a child co-"

Serenity reached up and touched a button.

Suddenly the hallway was a glow in amber light. As I gaped at the light, Serenity chirped, "You turned the light off." You can turn the light off! Or on! What the hell, how did she know how to use my magic-tech magical technology thingy better than me. This was. Argh.

I sucked at technology, and was a cyborg. I was a walking talking contradiction.

"Okay." I said sitting on my haunches staring at the dim amber world. "How do we get out?" I turned to Flare and he just sort of shrugged. Lovely.

"Well there is a way. Ain't never been here on account of the ghosts." Just as he said that, something creaked somewhere in the underground complex. "Heard stories about it. Ponies getting lost. Old walls crumbling and the dead coming to life." Flare kept talking even as Serenity had started taking shelter under my legs. "They say the last pony to venture into these tunnels went mad, and found jabbering to himself in the darkness a week later. Ever since, the tunnel has been closed so only the ghosts may wander its halls."

"Serenity." I rolled my eyes and stroked her mane as she shivered, "Flare's just trying to get you going. Ignore him. He's an ass." She gave the slightest of nods as I returned to my feet. It was time for one of those plan thingies I was so good at.

My light didn't give me all the illumination I would have liked, but it was better than nothing. The tunnel was long and dark and dirty, but it seemed mostly clear of debris. Directly to my right and left were two doors, though the one to my right was boarded up by wood with something scrawled in red above it. Ignoring those options I chose the 'walk forward until you reach something' option.

"Lets go."

As we started walking, wind whispered through the cavern, and for a second I thought I knew what it was saying.

"So," Serenity said not a few minutes later. The walk was so far tedious and sort of dirty, but had been peacefully quiet. Nothing but the whispering of the wind to calm my mind. "Know any other ghost

stories, Flare?”

“Yeah.” Flare had kept to walking in the dirt like a regular earth pony. No doubt because the hallway was far too cramped for any of his usual aerial manoeuvres.

“Wait,” I interrupted with my usual grace, “I thought you didn't like them?” I kicked an empty can down the hallway. Its tinny ting echoed through the hall, and Serenity eeped at the unexpected sound.

“Well.” She squirmed on my back some. “Sometimes it’s really fun to be scared.”

“Right. I'd rather you not.” I rolled my eyes. I'd rather she not get scared and then run off or wet herself or something. Not that either of those things were very likely, I wanted to cut the chance of them down to zero. You know, as a rule.

“I've got a story!” Flare zipped in front of me, a grin on his face. I kept walking though, so he was forced to float backwards. I wasn't about to stop for such foolishness. “Its the horrifying tale of the giant, uptight ghost, who never let anypony have any fun!” That didn't seem like any ghost I’ve ever heard. “OoooOOooooOo!” He waved his hooves in front of me.

Serenity giggled on my back, and it was then that I realized what had just happened. Mocking me like that could not go unanswered.

“Well. I know... the... uh... scary story... about a ghost... who was annoying.”

Nailed it.

Since Serenity was laughing even harder, I knew I had achieved ghost story victory, so I rightfully pushed past Flare and strode forward. For about three steps.

Creak.

Never good. I kept walking, completely oblivious to the huge cracks in the stone underhoof, and the way it wobbled under my weight. I took two more steps.

Crack.

Fuck.

The floor crumbled away. With nothing under my hooves, I started falling. Without thinking, I reached out. Dimly I was aware of Serenity being plucked off my back. My flailing forelegs slammed into something. My heart racing, I could barely see until I stopped, jerking my heart into my throat.

I was hanging on; just barely. I could feel myself slipping as I looked at Flare and Serenity. They were lying on the non-collapsed floor breathing heavy but mostly alright, though Serenity's mane looked frazzled and I thought I saw a hint of blood on Flare's wing.

“Ow.” I groaned.

Without a second thought Serenity ran over and started pulling on my hoof. It didn't help much but I favoured her with a smile. “C'mon! Get up. We'll getcha out! C'mon Flare!”

Kicking my legs uselessly as Flare slowly moved over I remarked, “By all means. Take your time.” I was only hanging on the precipice of... of something. Looking down I saw only blackness, and heard only wind. Wind that sounded suspiciously like growling.

“I'm trying.” Flare grunted as he pulled at my leg. Was his wing supposed to have a hole in it? “You're heavy.”

“Thanks.” I grunted, trying to drag myself out of the pit. Ever so slowly I inched forward. Growling, I could feel feel a piece of steel rebar stabbing into my gut like a stabbing pain thing. As I slowly

climbed out of the pit I could feel it drag against my chest, cutting into it. When it reached my saddlebag strap I heard a snap. Suddenly I was lighter... fuck!

As fast as I could, I reached down with my metal leg trying to grab my saddle bags. All I managed to catch was the hem of my dress as it fell out of my bag, with the bag in question falling into the abyss. Somewhere below me I heard growling, a gnashing of teeth, and a tearing of... something.

For some inexplicable reason, I no longer wanted my legs dangling in the pit. With all our combined strength, I managed to crawl out. Out of all my supplies, all I managed to save was the one thing I didn't want. This dress was haunting me, I was sure.

I regretted ever thinking this tunnel was a good idea.

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We walked back the way we came. Serenity had patched us up as much as she was able, which was not much considering nearly all our supplies were lost with my saddle bags. All we had left was my Celestia-damned dress, Subtlety, and whatever Flare had in his bags. Serenity had to resort to tearing Flare's red jumpsuit in order to make a bandage to wrap his wing in. Turns out being stabbed in the wing by a broken piece of steel hurt. Who knew?

My side stung as we walked, but I kept quiet about it. It was nothing I couldn't handle, and chest injuries were hardly new to me anymore. If I'd had a healing potion or Med-X, I would have taken it in a second, but without the option I would live.

It did not take long until we made it back to our starting point. So you know, excellent progress.

"Which door?" One was barricaded by wood, and the other not. It didn't really matter which one we chose, as we had no idea what went where, only that we were to open one and try to make our way out of this dank dark place. Serenity pointed at the barricaded one so I walked over to it.

The barricade was strong, but it still took me only a single buck to slam it open. Bringing my legs back down they felt a little numb, but I got over it and walked through the door. Waving my pipbuck around the room I got an amber interpretation of what the room looked like. Strangely enough it looked sort of office-ish. Shrugging, I started forward.

"Spread out. Flare, go with Serenity. Look over that side, and I'll look over here. Try to find a way forward." Serenity's horn sparked with dull pink light and she nodded gravely at me before walking off, Flare in tow.

I waved my pipbuck around periodically to see, but it did not help as much as I would have liked. Shadows danced as I weaved through rows of tumbled and broken desks, and I hit the end wall before I even realized it was there. It was not a large room, and next to nothing in it. That was, until I saw a green glow out of the corner of my eye.

A working terminal. I trotted over ignoring the reek of something nearby. The computer looked cracked and dirty, but despite everything it was actually on, casting my face in an eerie green glow. Licking my lips for a second, I bent over and pressed a few buttons with my nose, hoping to find a map of the complex.

*"Work has continued slowly in the eastern suburbs. A few local communities have formed groups and are protesting to the mayor. They claim the tunnels are a secret Equestrian project. Our boys managed to convince them it was not Equestrian in nature, but it was a tough sell. Regardless of what they do we still need to finish the tunnels... if only they knew. Its not my concern though. Wallkirk wants the tunnels done, and it will be done, but we will need more security. Can you send some?"*

*Swift Star”*

I clicked forward.

*“Fr yu baby? Nt a prblem. Gt sme new stallins waiting for a chance. Just say when and where and they'll be there. Tell Wallkirk I'll send the cheque in the mail, and he wn't regret chsing surefire security.*

*Surefire Waves.*

*P.S. Srry, my '0' key is brken. Need t yell at tech supprt. ll”*

Wow. Could that get anymore boring. Lacking anything more interesting to do I clicked to the final saved email as a strange wind whispered in my ear.

*“Weekly Report: After the riot last week no significant protests have hindered tunnel construction. Of the planned lines only two have yet to be dug, and the main line is fully furnished and operational. In accordance to the increased violence on the western front, as well as in new information received from our Equestrian partners we have increased our schedule to be done by the new year. However, our former Security Contract, Surefire Security has suddenly cut all ties with the project. We believe it is due to the package you sent in last week for storage. We are currently exploring legal options on Surefire Security, and I will give you a full report when the papers have been filed. In the mean time I have attached all relevant documents regarding our contract with Surefire Security, as well as our updated timetable. Thank you for your time, Mr. Wallkirk.*

*Swift Star”*

Welp, that sure was an interesting read. Turning back, I thought I felt that breeze again. Following it through the amber glow of my pipbuck, I came upon a door. Obviously, I opened said door. And nearly fell.

The door led to the hallway, right where the floor had given way. Groaning I took a step back cursing my luck when I heard a shout.

I knew the voice.

I ran through the office sending, shelves and desks out of my way, stopping only when I saw the dull light of Serenity's horn. And the ghoul standing in front of her. Its mouth wide open, and dripping saliva.

Subtlety took the beast in the shoulder, spraying Serenity with gore, as the ghoul spun and fell. Not waiting a second more, I rushed over and held the foal in my legs. “It's okay. It's okay.” I said, but I was more thinking about where the hell was Flare.

“Get... this thing off of me!” Not three feet away, Flare was struggling under a second. Damn these things. Throwing Serenity onto my back I tensed my muscles as Subtlety fired again. The ghoul flew into a wall at the impact, making a bloody mural.

“Thanks.” Flare squirmed to his feet, his eyes still wide. “There's more!” Following his hoof I saw them. More than a dozen of those... those things shambling out of a hole in the wall. More than we could fight.

“Run.”

Out the door, and across the hall. We went through door number two and slammed it behind us. Without thinking, I grabbed the nearest thing I found, a filing cabinet, and threw it across the door. Then for good measure me and Flare pushed a desk in front of it too.

“Everypony okay?” I asked, leaning against our barricade ignoring my aching side.

“Y-yeah.” Serenity nodded. I didn't believe her. Considering the fact she was visibly shaken, close to tears, and had blood splattered over her pink coat and mane (the mane was more of a guess. Given the way red was splotted onto her yellow mane normally, it was hard to tell), I was going to assume she was just trying to be tough.

“Fuck no.” Flare whined. “My wing is all stabbed, and that ghoul nearly bit me! To top it off I think I'm starting to go crazy and hear things! It totally sucks dude, fuck these tunnels. I can't fly.”

“Well.” I groaned, getting to my feet to survey the room. “All the more reason to leave.” Somehow.

Yeah, I was worried. My heart was pounding, and my stomach felt like it was trying to tighten itself into a ball, but I ignored it. I brought us here with a filly, so it was my job to be brave. Even in the cold darkness where the wind whispered names to me. Even when we were chased by zombetic freaks, and we were out of food and healing potions.

The room was dark and stagnant, similar to the one before, but it seemed longer, and my pipbuck light was not nearly as strong as I would have wished. I took a single step forward. Into a pile of bones with a crunch. Twisting away, I had to shake my leg to get the bones off of me.

It was not all a loss though as beside the pony remains was a single 12mm pistol. “Flare.” I said before lifting the weapon up and tossing it to the pegasus. “Catch.”

The blue pony caught it easily as Serenity came strolling up. “Is that...” She poked the bones and gasped a bit, stepping back. I could see her already pale coat getting impossibly paler. “A pony?” Shit. I really didn't want to traumatize the poor thing. In fact, I wanted her to stay at The Watchers. Even as the easy excuse came into my head I dismissed it; I choose to bring her into an uncertain and dangerous situation and nopony was to blame but myself.

“It's...” I struggled for the words. “A Pony.” I admitted. “A brave pony. Who died here two hundred years ago. Just like those ghouls, they were ponies once too.” What could I say but the truth. She knew very well ponies died, and there was no lie to say. “All ponies die. Even Celestia.” They weren't comforting words, I could see that plain as day when she looked up pleadingly at me. “But we aren't dead. And so long as we can walk, we can survive. It is good to feel sad for death.” I wiped a tear from her eyes. “It means you are a good pony.”

“I'm sorry.” She sniffled. “I'll be strong.”

“You are strong.” Cheesy I know. “So just keep being strong. We have a long way to go. And I need you to be strong. Because you're a big strong pony. And I need you to keep Flare from being scared.”

“Yeah.” She smiled a little. “Flare is a wimp.”

“I am not!”

---

*...wake up...*

The wind whispered in my ear. I knew that the wind could not actually be saying anything, but it was doing a damn good job convincing me otherwise.

Looking around me, the dark walls pressed in on all sides. My pipbuck turned every object into a

shadow and my movements made the shadows dance and mock me as I walked. Were I a younger pony, I may have been frightened. But there were more frightening things in this tunnel than shadows and imagination.

“Find anything?” Serenity called just outside the door.

I'd stumbled upon a small office room and was desperately searching for something. Anything. I was hoping, honestly, to find a few .50 caliber rounds and a half dozen healing potions, but instead found papers and pencils. The only thing of interest was an audio-log. Hoping it'd provide a clue as to how to escape, I stuck it in to my pipbuck.

“...*Don't trust him.*” One pony said to which another replies.

“*And why not?*”

“*Ever since his crew took over for Surefire things have gotten tight. Ya know? Course ya do. And then I hear he sits all day staring at that orb and barking at anypony that disturbs him. It ain't right I say. And then there's...*” There was a shuffling and the second pony said something I couldn't hear. “*They say he records everything. Hidden cameras. Recorders. I just... don't feel safe. I'm going to tell Swift Star I'm resigning tomorrow.*”

“*If you're sure.*” The second pony said. “*Just stay safe dear.*”

“*I will mom.*”

The recording ended and once again I got nothing useful out of it. I was starting to wonder if these recordings and emails were just set up to piss me off and confuse me.

“What was that!” Serenity said needlessly loud as I returned from the office.

“Nothing.” I shrugged. We were still stuck in the long office we used to escape the ghouls, though we had made it to the far end. We had also found a few more corpses, but Serenity was strong and pushed past, while Flare ignored them as nothing new. Scavenging around we had managed to find a few useful things: a bottle of water, a vial of med-X, a bottle of wonder-glue, and (strangely) a second pistol. I took that one for myself. Subtlety only held eight rounds I already used two, and all my ammo was lost with my saddle bags.

...*Silver Storm...*

I found myself jerking and searching for the voice. Stupid Silver. I knew it was the wind, but... it sounded so familiar.

“Yo. Earth. Earth to Gun,” Flare said, waving his forelegs in front of my face. I swatted at his hooves. “Welcome back. What was that?”

“Thought... it doesn't matter.” I pushed passed him. “Think I saw a door over here.” I trotted slowly across the room trying to clear my mind. This place was just... getting to me. I thought I heard Flare say something about 'going crazy' but I ignored that too.

There was, in fact, a door in the direction I was heading. Clutching uselessly at the handle was the skeleton of a unicorn. Sighing I kicked the bones away with a rattle. I could hear Serenity squeak behind me, but I chose not to address it. I figured she was trying hard enough in a bad situation and pointing it out would have been counter productive. Or something.

...*You'll be late...*

I shivered as the wind whispered again. Dammit Silver, just ignore it. Shaking the thought away, I turned back to the door. Illuminated in amber were the words: "Run. Escape. Do Not Sleep, The Voice." written in what only could have been blood. A sudden burst of rage took over my and I shove my metal hoof into the door. With a crack and shower of splinters, the door and message were turned to firewood. Luckily, before Serenity could see it.

"Mom." Her voice was a hushed whisper. So light I wasn't sure who she was talking to her. Even still I walked up to her.

"Serenity. What did I say about calling me that?" Her grey eyes blinked for a second as she turned to me. Something creaked somewhere and echoed throughout the building sending a shiver down my spine.

"I.. " She wasn't talking to me. Of course she wasn't. Nope, just hearing words on the wind.

... Actually. Why was there wind at all? I mean weren't we under the city in some Celestia-forsaken tunnel? How could there be wind at all? My body tensed and I swallowed. If it wasn't wind...

No. It had to be the wind.

"C'mon," I said, my head tilting towards the broken door. Somewhere off to my right I saw something. Without thinking, I turned and moved to strike... only to find Flare twitching his nose in the rubble under a desk. "Flare. C'mon." His wing twitching, he stuck his head out.

"Found diff." He mumbled around the magazine in his mouth. Really, I was not sure what I was supposed to do with that. Flipping his head the comic unravelled. On it was a surprisingly well preserved picture of orange coated mare with a comically large sword in her mouth.

"Canterlot Comics Presents." I read out loud, "Sword Mare And The Revenge Of The Windigos..." I raised an eyebrow and just shook my head. "Keep it if you want. Maybe Serenity would like it..." Honestly, wasting my time on something so silly was just... silly.

"You've never heard of Swordmare? When I was a little buck I used to love her, figured she'd be your idol or something." I basically ignored him and walked back the rubble of the door, and body beside it. He kept talking. "She was awesome. near the end of the war she traveled through time and fought Steel Rangers, but lost and teamed together to purge the Zebras. Seems silly to me, if you ask me, cause she could'a won with a simple Spark Pulse Emitter."

Walking into the hallway, I shivered. It was the same one we started in, though from the looks of it we had cleared the section that had collapsed, meaning we were finally able to continue. Yay. So we had made progress and only had a few serious injures to show for it. Across the small hallway was another door, and it was a toss up between trying the door or chancing the long hallway that liked to drop me into pits. Either way there was a high probability of failure and pain.

*...Marigold will be angry...*

She can wait five minutes.

Fuck.

This was too much. "Somepony choose," I said sitting on my haunches, exasperated. The wind was driving me nuts, my side was stinging like a bitch, and I hadn't slept since my surgery however long ago.

"Oh! I choose!" Serenity ran up in front of me and made a show of rubbing her chin with her hoof. She gave a good half-second of serious contemplation before pointing dramatically. Running over, she

jumped up to the handle of the door on the opposite side of the hallway. With a click and a whoosh the door swung open.

Revealing a mouth full of sharp teeth.

Serenity shrieked. I blasted away with Subtlety, but being as I was sitting the bullet embedded itself uselessly into the ceiling with a shower of pebbles and plaster. As I scrambled to my feet the ghoul was moving so fast, its mouth clamping around Serenity's leg. There was blood. And a scream, and I just wasn't fast enough.

There was a blue blur. Flare's hoof moved so fast I could barely see it, and the zombie pony let go. The pegasus grappled with the zombie, trying to push him away, only for more to appear from the doorway. Slamming the zombie-ponies head into the wall Flare stood his ground, though with one hoof fiddling with his battle saddle.

Subtlety fired, and a whole row of Ghouls found themselves with a large holes. Nudging Flare, I grabbed Serenity and tossed her on my back as gently as I could and ran the fuck out of there.

The ghouls followed. Their corpse-like bodies couldn't run as fast as Flare or I, but fuck did they try. Even still Ghouls never tired, I was pretty sure. So even as we ran forward, flashing past broken and barricaded doors, we would be caught. Eventually. Or... actually fuck that. We would *survive*. I didn't just go and piss off and escape from a city of gangsters just to be killed by some mindless ghouls and their creepy wind.

Through their moaning I heard something. The wind returned. Serenity sobbed quietly on my back and I tried to focus on her but I couldn't. I kept hearing the damnable wind.

*...Silver... come back to bed...*

Ignoring it I galloped on, and on. My side stung, and my legs grew sore, but I refused to stop, not so long as I heard those beasts behind me.

*...don't leave me... I've been waiting...*

Against my better judgement I looked back, though I kept running. Through the dull light of my pipbuck, and pressed behind the mass of ghouls and shadows; I saw her. A red figure glowing in the darkness. My heart leapt and I stopped. I knew in my mind it couldn't be , but... but it was.

*...I knew you'd save me... quickly...*

I don't remember taking Serenity off my back. But as I charged the ghoulish horde she was no longer there. It didn't matter though. I had to get there. To her. Discord himself wouldn't have been able to keep me from her. It's been so long, but I knew she had to be alive. There was no other option, for there she was. Tears stung my eyes, because the Goddess' had given her another chance and still she came to me. So, I charged towards the red figure so far away, my gun cleaving scores of ghouls with each shot. Blood flew through the air like red rain, but it meant nothing to me. Only her. It was only ever her.

Then my world became fire.

Coughing I found myself on my back, groaning from the force of the explosion. In the flames above me Flare stood. His saddle blared and fire erupted again hitting me in the chest like a kick. "What're you doing!" I screamed trying to get to my feet. "Wildfire!" Through the smoke dust and flames I couldn't see the red. She was dying, the explosions they must have-

SMACK

My cheek burned from Flare's hoof. He glared down at me. "Get a hold of yourself! What the fuck, whatever you're seeing ignore it!" Behind him I saw the red pony. I nearly pushed him away. Struck him. Killed him. I could have if I wanted to but he kept yelling. "Serenity is back there hurt and scared and you're chasing ghosts. They aren't real. This place is fucking with you, and if you listen you're letting it win."

*Survive.*

Behind him the the red pony twisted and faded into the wind. It was never there.

---

"What do you see?" I asked, staring down the long hall. We had managed to escape what ghouls Flare didn't blow up, and even found the main tunnel (I figured from the larger size and grate similar to the one under Parasite Mound). Staring down one side I saw the red figure again, perpetually out of reach.

"My mother," Serenity said slowly, resting against me. When we had entered the main tunnel we had lucked upon a healing potion on the corpse a long dead pony. Though Flare was far more injured we had decided to let Serenity have the potion, because, well because she was a filly. She tried to protest, of course, but the bite marks on her legs were deep and painful enough she had to limp. In the end, she wasn't really given a choice in the matter.

We had to rest though, or the visions were going to drive us mad. Madder. So we stopped and laid down when it seemed the ghouls had left us alone, and together we stared into the darkness playing the 'hallucination guessing game'. It was Serenity's idea: instead of worrying about the words and images we talked about them, assuring ourselves of them. Reminding us they weren't really there. Moreover, she explained, it was fun.

"Knew it," Flare said leaning not far away against a wall. "What was she like?" Flare, so far, had been really good at guessing.

"I..." Serenity scrunched up her face. "I don't remember. Well I do. It was just a long time ago. She used to sing for me, and somehow she always smelled sweet." She glared down the dark hallway at whatever it is the tunnel made her see. "She said she was coming back, but never did. Bad ponies got her." She stomped her hoof and buried her muzzle in my chest. "I can hear her singing." Apparently, the game was not as fun as advertised.

"Flare's is a mare." I guessed quickly, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, long time ago. She was the sweetest little thing, though I can't remember her name I remember the face." Flare sighed. "Didn't know her a month before we were talking about getting married. She was Earth pony though... my sergeant didn't much like that. Strange." He didn't bother looking at me. "She turned up dead later that week. Until now. She keeps smiling at me."

I closed my eyes and tried my best to be anywhere else. I succeeded. A warmth flowed over me and I had the distinctive feeling of being tucked under the covers. There was a vision and a memory and suddenly I was cuddled up beside somepony. A cold wind whipped through the room, chilling me to my bones. So I moved closer. The sensation of touching somepony was so genuine I was swept up in it. Even as she started to... oh... My eyes snapped open with a blush on my cheeks. That was not the sort of thing to daydream with a filly near by.

"What about you?" Serenity looked up at me, innocence fresh in her eyes. "What do you see?" Wildfire. I blushed just a little bit more.

"Wildfire." Flare said trotting over to us, "Least that's what she said when I had to knock her block

back there.” He grinned at me. “A marefriend?”

“A friend.” I insisted forcing back my blush. “She was a good friend. Died when I did something stupid. I don't want to talk about it.”

“Aww come on.” Serenity tugged at my ear with her magic. “We told our stories. Its your turn.”

Words could not describe how much that was not happening. “Nothing else to tell.” I slowly got to my feet, and looked around. “Flare. How many grenades do you have left?”

“Two. Won't do us much good if they get the jump on us.” Not unless we had a death wish. Still he was doing better then I was. Having wasted all my .50 calibre ammo in my suicide run against the horde, I was left only with the pistol I scavenged (and I wasn't even sure how many rounds it had in it), and my metal leg. Though it was a good thing Flare's grenade launchers were able to be modified to fire straight on instead of just down or we'd be really screwed.

“Lovely.” I said helping Serenity onto my back before waving my pipbuck around. The amber light helped just a little in getting out bearings, but the darkness only waned a little. There was so much I couldn't see, but needed to in order to make a smart decision. “Well.” I pointed down the main hall. “Those... vision thingies.” A red figure smiled through the darkness at me. “Coming from there, yeah?”

They both nodded.

“Well. I propose not going that way.” Serenity nodded just a little bit, while Flare looked a bit apprehensive but agreed. Turning my head towards the other side of the main hallway I said, “And that way is blocked.” It looked like a cave in but I wasn't really sure. “Which leaves.” Across from the door we entered the main hallway, was a similarly shaped door.

“Onward.”

Through the door was yet another decrepit hallway. I was shocked. Truly.

*...Don't leave me...*

It only took a few steps to run into the first corpse. A fresh one. After commanding Serenity to close her eyes I leaned over the body and gave it a once over. It looked to be a ghoul, and its security barding (Safe Bet Security; Always a Safe Bet) showed not signs of impact. It didn't look like a natural death though, the way the body was just lying there. Touching the body, I started to search for goods.

“No.”

It spoke!

I jumped back and gasped at the thing. It kept... talking. “I... escaped. Yes finally. The door opened. I escaped.”

I kicked the body. Hard. It didn't react. It just kept mumbling and sleeping. I kicked it twice more with my metal leg, but nothing happened.

“Welp.” Flare said jumping over it and turning to me and Serenity. “I guess this would be a perfect time not to sleep then?” Of course I had to yawn just as he said that. None of us have had a very good sleep schedule the past few days, and this realization only helped to make me sleepier. To my right a red vision passed, but I pushed it back to my mind. “This reminds me of a time.”

We moved around the pony and kept walking.

“Back when I was just old enough to join the training corps.” My eyes scanned the tunnel: every single crack crevice and stain to keep my mind occupied. “We went on a mission to deal with the minotaurs

on behest of Flankyard.” Smearred across the wall was a deep brown stain. “Training corps was only there to watch you see, as the real Remnants worked. Managed to set up a meeting with the Chairman of Flankyard and Minotaur tribal boss guy thingy.” As we passed over a scrap of paper on the ground I took a second to read it. *...orb from the mountain. Mr Wallkirk says...* We passed by and it didn't seem interesting enough to stop for. “Well during the meeting, the monsters poisoned the tea. Some sort of sleeping powder.” Something was in front of us I could see vaguely from my pipbuck light. “Well luckily I caught on an-”

“Dead end.” I interrupted Flare. He glared, but nodded when he saw the crumbled rock blocking our path. We could have climbed over it, but I didn't want to risk it. Instead I opted for a safer route.

“Lookie! A door.” Serenity pointed, and was quite correct. Luckily enough, there was a door to our right. “We can go through it, then I want Flare to finish his story.”

Inside I thought I saw something. Actually I knew I saw it, but just pretended I wasn't sure.

“C'mon.” I pushed away an empty desk. The room was large and when I waved my pipbuck above my head I couldn't even see the ceiling. “There has to be an exit.” No there didn't. In fact I was almost completely sure there was not an exit nearby at all. Still, I kept a slim smile on my face and led my little group through the huge room. What would anyplace need with so many desks?

“Wassat?” Serenity pointed to something on the wall to my left. Turning, I could see a simple wooden door with a spray of holes across it. Seemed like as good a guess as any so I trotted forth, ignoring the shockingly close pleading face of Wildfire.

Following her pointing hoof, we came upon a small door riddled with small holes. Opening it we came upon yet another small office, though this one had a lovely accessory: the bones of a pony slumped over a mahogany desk with a shotgun beside it. Also there was a bloodstain on the wall, and desk. “Stay here,” I said.

The first thing I did was throw the shotgun to Flare, in hopes that he actually knew how to use it. I had seen unicorns use them on occasion, but mouth firing just seemed far too difficult, not to mention painful. A filly back in Marefort once had one kick back so hard it flew from her magical grip and cracked another's head right open. If nothing else I supposed it could be used as a bludgeon.

*...Is it bad?...*

Gently nudging the skeleton onto the floor with a rattle I rummaged through the desk. Additions to my inventory were as follows: 24 pre wars bits, 2 bottle caps, one warm bottle of sunrise sarsaparilla ultra (now with radishes), a single shotgun slug, and (how exciting) a piece of paper with gibberish written on it.

Not your usual confusing gibberish that was hoof-picked to confuse the hell out of me. This was special grade-A gibberish. Top of the line. I figured it was basically rare and worth a lot of caps. On account on how little sense it made. It quite literally said:

“49:20:68:61:76:65:20:61:20:63:6f:6e:66:72:69:6d:61:74:69:6f:6e:20:6f:6e:20:74:68:65:20:6f:72:6  
2:2e:20:  
57:61:6c:6c:6b:69:72:6b:20:68:61:73:20:62:65:65:6e:20:61:20:62:75:73:79:20:6c:69:74:74:6c:65:  
20:62:6f:  
64:79:2c:20:69:74:20:73:65:65:6d:73:2e:20:50:69:6e:6b:69:65:20:77:69:6c:6c:20:77:61:6e:74:20:  
74:6f:20  
:6b:6e:6f:77:2e:20:43:61:6e:20:79:6f:75:20:73:65:6e:64:20:61:20:74:65:61:6d:20:64:6f:77:6e:20:4  
1:53:41:

50:3f:20:54:68:61:6e:6b:73:2e”

Rolling my eyes at the ridiculous note, I looked up.

There was a sound like rushing water, and then everything turned grey. My eyes darted around the room, and somehow it looked new. Like it did when it was first built, only without colour. A colourless pony burst through the door and its mouth flapped at me but I heard nothing. It handed me the note, but gasped and turned around. Two more colourless ponies burst in brandishing weapons in magic. On their chests were the words “Safe Bet Security”. Their guns flashed and the pony that gave me the note fell in a shower of blood. I screamed.

I fell from my chair, and Flare and Serenity rushed onto the room. “Are you okay,” Serenity asked quickly before giggling at me lying there on the floor.

“Peachy.” Only going insane, no big deal.

Groaning and getting to my feet I smirked at Serenity before returning to more lovely black underground office building thingy. Shadows and wind were there to greet me, which were as bad as crazy ass visions so I cantered on casually.

There was silence as we walked. I don't know if the others were having the same feeling as I was, but I'd this feeling of being watched. My skin crawled, and the visions of Wildfire flashing around the room at random did not help. With each step forward I felt my stomach tightening up. I smacked my dry lips together and kept my head calm as best I could. Between the winds whispering in my ear, the visions, and the tingling sensation on my coat it was really hard.

Then I saw her.

It took all of my will power not to run to her. That charcoal grey filly staring up at me. That poor little thing me and Wildfire found in the mountain village. That poor thing.

Shutting my eyes, I refused to think of her name.

Closing my eyes was a bad idea. Suddenly my senses were barraged by a memory. Warm night outside Marefort. Eating food brought in by newly arrived traders. Sweet smells and laughter as we started tried to teach Fo-that grey filly how to play soccer. It was a good day. Heh. A good day, it had been so long I forgot what it was like. I don't know how long I stayed in that place, so long ago, but it was far too long.

“HIRED!”

My eyes shot open and I was alone.

Flare was gone, Serenity was off my back. Serenity's scream echoed throughout the room, but I could see nothing. Until a pair of red eyes was suddenly in front of me. Follows shortly but a grinning muzzle of sharp teeth.

My hoof cracked the beast in the face as it lunged for me. It howled and fell back but charged again. This time I used the metal hoof. Blood seeped down the beast's mottled flesh as it fell to a knee. I finished it. Every so slowly it toppled over, its brains seeping from its skull and onto the floor.

“HIRED!”

...*Silver*...

I followed the voice. Serenity's voice. Leaping through a broken wall I found three more monsters ready. They tried to rush me, but I really was not in the fucking mood.

BLAM BLAM BLAM.

With three shots of my pistol, all fell over, their blood splattered across the room. More groans followed but I pushed past and ignored them. They could fucking try to catch me.

They did.

My flank was burned, and I bucked wildly. The beast took to the air and crashed through a desk behind me. Looking back, I saw blood flowing down my flank from a bite wound just above my cutie-mark, turning it and my whole leg red. I winced in pain as I tried to move, but I heard a wordless scream echoing through the dark. So I kept going even as blood flowed from my new wound.

I could hear. That's all I needed. Follow the voice. As long as she kept screaming, my pipbuck would light the way, and Serenity didn't even have that, so I couldn't complain. I just had to save her. Light blinded me from the right as an explosion blasted out.

I guess I could save Flare too.

I charged towards the explosion. Serenity needed saving, but it'd be easier with Flare's firepower. I didn't like it, but dammit I had to. The first ghoul's head snapped hard to the side as he was flung into the wall. The second was stomped to death, and the third I kicked ineffectively as Flare had already shotgunned it to death. Throwing down his presumably empty shotgun he looked up at me. His coat was dark with dirt and dust, and his jumpsuit was in tatters.

“Hired!” he screamed, rearing up. “What happened!?”

I panted as blood soaked down my flank, “You. You tell me.”

“You just. Stopped for like five minutes. Wouldn't respond. Tried everything and then.. something leaped out of butt-fuck no where and grabbed her!... I tried to give chase but these zombie fuckers...” He shook his head and flapped his wounded wing. “Can't do shit. Everything fucking hurts.” He grit his teeth. “When I close my eyes I see things. Just for a second... but everything is going wrong and it's hard...”

Just lie down and sleep. Be with Wildfire and the filly for the rest of my life. I would be lying if I said there wasn't something inciting in that thought, but... Serenity still needed saving. And no matter how realistic a dream is, it is never real.

“Tell ya what. Once we get out of here. You can sleep for a week.”

He smiled grimly at me. “Yeah. I'd like that. I'd like it a bunch.” Stretching, he strode forward. “We better get go-”

“HIIIIIIREDD!”

We ran.

The voice was getting louder and there was... a feeling in my shoulder that was not like anything I'd felt before. My shoulder did not burn like it did usually around magic, more like it stung. Kind of like being shocked by static, but constantly. I followed the sensation, and the pain only got worse as we moved.

I stopped.

“Flare.” I grunted. “Need the Med-X.” Without wasting a breath, the vial we found earlier was out of his pack and injected into my shoulder. Just like that, the pain washed away, leaving a dull feeling in my shoulder. Just enough so I could follow the magical presence to whatever was causing it. Something horrible most likely.

We happened upon a door. On it the words, “Security Chief's Office: No Admittance.” On a scale from

one to ten, I gave exactly zero fucks about what that sign had to say. With a buck, the door was broken down, and I found Serenity.

If only that was all I found.

The room was large and spacious with no furniture except a single marble-looking pedestal. Upon it was a small sphere, no larger than a billiard ball that pulsed with.... With something. Whatever it pulsed with, I could feel the magic it expelled in my shoulder. Even with Med-X flowing through my veins, I could feel it like a bolt of lightning. Celestial incest, what was that thing?

“No. No no no no I was so close.” Seven were already in the room. Serenity was lying on the ground, bleeding heavily as six ghouls circled her: five normal ghouls, and a much larger ghoul wearing security barding (Safe Bet Security Chief). He still had wisps of a green mane hanging around his horn, and a bloody knife floated in his magical grip. “Wallkirk said. Have the soul, have the orb, have the ponies. Mine all mine, he said. Need a filly, I heard it. All I need. You're ruining everything! Get them!”

The five ghouls charged, and I prepared myself for a fight.

That never happened. Suddenly Flare glided in on his broken wing and kicked one ghoul in the head. The second was wing slapped, and a third was headbutted. “Hired!” He grunted trying to fight off too many ponies at once. “Save. Your daughter.” He bit one in the neck and twisted before turning back to me, his mouth bloody. “I got this.”

*...Don't go... I need you...*

Suddenly Wildfire was right in front of me. Not a ghostly apparition like before, but as real as the last time I saw her. There was a fluttering of eyelashes and I melted. I felt a flush of warmth across my whole body as she leaned over to kiss me. Then I ran right through her to Serenity without a second thought.

Two of the ghouls Flare was engaging broke off and broke my line of sight. Something happened to them, as a few seconds later I walked over their broken and bloody corpses. Even dead and feral, they should have known better than to get between me and my... Serenity.

Before that ghoul bastard could touch her again, I kicked that sonofabitch in the head. There was a crack, and the green-maned ghoul fell to the side, his knife spinning and clanging off the concrete floor. I ignored him, and wrapped my forelegs around Serenity's bloody body. Sweet Celestia, she wasn't moving. “Serenity,” I said softly. Vaguely I could hear Flare's pistol firing behind me.

“Serenity.” I bit my lip. It wasn't supposed to end this way. She was supposed to live. Why did every pony I like have to die on account of my stupidity? I never wanted any of this. I just wanted a peaceful life. A simple life. “Serenity... please.” Flare was right. I could just close my eyes. Fall to whatever magic haunted this place and I could live in peace. I nearly closed my eyes, when she opened hers.

Those sad grey eyes were the most amazing thing I ever saw. Reaching up with a timid hoof, she wiped my cheek. “Your face is leaking....”

Pain blinded me.

Suddenly I was on my back, my pistol spinning away and Serenity hitting the floor.

“No, nononononon! She IS Mine! I must have her.” I gasped for air, as my shoulder burned, and Subtlety dug painfully into my back. “You! You are supposed to listen gogogo to sleep my little pony. Go to sleep and let me in. Wallkirk said-he said I could be in control. Then then you ponies fucked it up. You bombed and died and now I am so close. The *mountain* calls soon I will be there, don't you see? Ccaaaan't you feel it. They call and all I need is a filly. I have the soul.” His horn burned with a

green fury as I wheezed for breath but found nothing. Slowly my vision started to fade, and everything was dark.

I struggled, and squirmed but the darkness was too much. Each second I felt myself dying a little bit more under his grasp. Everything hurt so much. “Yes. Sleep. Feel it. Close your eyes and become mine, you will... you will.” I was. As much as I didn't want to I felt the visions coming back. Wildfire and the filly whose name I would not say. Everything was dark. “Yes. Yes you will di-”

BANG

Sweet air flooded my lungs. I gasped, my eyes shooting open as the pony fell on me. The room was back, and there was light. In front of me, standing over the body of the dead pony, was Serenity. Grasped in pink magic before her was my pistol, still smoking.

She was crying.

Flare stumbled over and wrapped a wing around her. A few seconds later I was there too.

“I... I killed him...,” she sobbed. “I... I don't wanna hurt anypony... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I-i didn't mean it. I-i don't want to be a bad pony. I didn't mean to... but... but he was hurting... and I just wanted to stay with Mommy.” She was sobbing into my chest, staining my coat with tears and blood.

“I...” I didn't know what to say so I just held her. The first kill is always the hardest.

“Sometimes good ponies do bad things to survive,” Flare said. “He was a monster, Serenity. A monster about to kill your mommy. It's... it's not something you should be proud of,” he nuzzled her, “but you did the right thing.”

“B-b-but. I.” I sat there and let her cry. The only sound was the was wind whispering and the sobs of the pink filly until eventually her eyes were still and she looked up to me. For all the time I had known her, her eyes had never looked sadder then at that moment. “I'm sorry.”

“No. I'm sorry,” I said holding her tight with my one good leg. “I never should have brought you. Too dangerous. It's my fault.... You should go back. To the Watchers.”

“But...” Serenity smiled so sweetly at me behind the tears, “who would protect you?”

I chuckled a bit, but not so much. Everything still hurt.

Serenity, I was glad to see, was not as badly hurt as I'd feared. The knife had cut deep on her ribs but hadn't punctured a lung or major artery. Scavenging Flare's jumpsuit for more fabric, we created a bandage for the wound, before we finally got to address the real problem.

That crazy stallion was, well, crazy. Dangerous, mind, but just a crazy ghoul who lost his mind two hundred years ago. Whatever that orb was, was the thing really causing the tunnel to go crazy. We had to address it, if only so our final escape would be that much less shitty.

Helping Serenity onto my back, I took a look at the pedestal, and the orb. “These tunnels. How far down do they go?”

Flare shrugged. “Very.”

Walking up to the pedestal I ignored the orb, and instead looked at the wall and inspected it. There was a huge crack running vertically along it, and another matching one on the floor. Pressing my ear against it I could hear wind. These tunnels went deep underground, or so I was led to believe, so I had to hope it'd be far enough.

Walking back to the door from whence we came I carefully avoided the bodies. Had Flare really taken out four ghouls with an injured wing and half full pistol? I made a mental note to give him mad props

later. We turned and faced the orb. I could hear it whisper.

*...I never wanted this... for either of us...*

*BOOM*

The force of Flare's last grenade shook the room with fire. When the smoke cleared, the orb was gone, and a huge hole was in its place. Slowly but surely, the wind faded, and I heard no more whispers. When I closed my eyes, only blackness reigned. When I opened them, the light of my pipbuck made shadows dance on the wall and put a smile on my face. This was the way it was suppose to be.

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“I can see it!”

My whole body ached, and my eyes pleaded for sleep. How long were we trapped under Dise? How long had it been since I last slept? I wasn't really sure, but I was sure it was all about to end soon. We had found stairs. Stairs! After having managed to fight our way through the rest of the ghouls, we had found the exit. So many ghouls, I had to wonder how many other ponies died in these unfinished tunnels. This Wallkirk fellow had been trying to save Dise, but he had failed and doomed so many to death and an eternity of un-death. Well, I guess he had tried.

We reached the door. Was this really the end? I could see the faintest bit of light between the cracks in the door, but part of me couldn't believe it. Taking stock, it was hard to imagine we survived. Flare was suffering a punctured wing, and more bites, scratches, and lacerations than I cared to count. Serenity was carrying fresh emotional scars and a deep cut on her chest that made her whimper with each step. For my part I had a long scrape across my chest, a chunk of flesh missing where I was bit, and the distinctive possibility my brain was scrambled from the choking.

Just what I needed.

With a hard kick the door swung open, and we were free. I took a tentative step... just as Flare rushed past me basking in the air. “It feels so good! For fucks sake, look at the sky! Yesss.” He looked almost silly standing there in his ripped up jumpsuit, but I had to smile.

“Freeeee,” Serenity squealed as we emerged.

The door was a simple wooden door attached a cliff-side just under an overhang. Looking to the west, I could see the wall and the tall buildings of Dise. Not as far away as I would have liked, but it didn't matter much to me as I lay there on the ground. Serenity hopped off my back, just so she could lay beside me. “Going to sleep.” I grumbled. “For a thousand years.”

I didn't though.

Thank Celestia for that.

Something caught my eye to the north. When I turned there was a light. Spears of light suddenly stabbed through the cloud layer like giant fingers. The line spiked south faster than I could follow and split off in all direction like a spiders web. “What is...,” Serenity mumbled when it happened.

The fingers pulled apart, and the spiders web broke. Blue sky appeared in the cracks as the rays of light pulled the clouds apart, and then a golden light washed forth, so bright and powerful it hurt to look, yet I could not look away. Within seconds, the fingers pulled and the web was gone, leaving a great swath of the sky rich with blue. In the centre was a golden orb that cast its light across the world.

I started to cry.

For there upon the sky, I had seen the face of Celestia. After so long... the goddess was returned. The sun had been brought back and I was basking in its warmth.

“Hired...,” Serenity looked up at me, tears of joy upon her face. “What is it?”

“The sun.” I wiped the tears from my eyes and held her close as Flare chuckled.

Of course a pegasus would have seen it, but he smiled too. How could you not? Everything. Everything was going to be all right.

“Flare,” Serenity sighed, resting against my chest, “tell us a story.”

“I got just the thing!” In a flash he whipped out his Swordmare comic and started reciting it, describing the pictures as he went. He told the tale with such gusto even I had to laugh. It was a fun story. A silly story.

A story meant for a time of rainbows and sunshine.

Footnote: Level Up!

Quest Perk: Dancing With The Devil: You’ve traveled to hell and back, and are no worse for wear, gaining +15 health and +5 rad resistance. On the other hoof, the memory of your journey still haunts you, and sometimes you are sure the winds whisper in your ear...

((A/N: Here is the aprt where I give a super big props to Kkat for creating this world I get to toy with. As well as to my editor theBSDude, and special pre-read Mint Julep, who also draws for me. Without these lovely ponies you would be reading trash. Now you’re reading slightly better trash, huzzah.))

## *Chapter 11: Knowing Is Half The Battle*

*“In a battle all you need to make you fight is a little hot blood and the knowledge that it's more dangerous to lose than to win.”*

“Sorry, Flare, You're out.”

“You can't do this! This is an outrage! It's just not fair! Listen, we've been through this so long, you can't... you can't just do this.” I shook my head and let Flare rage on. I knew he would never understand. But it had to be this way.

“Don't worry, Flare.” Serenity trotted up to him and patted him on the shoulder. “You can be on my team next time.” Not bloody likely.

“C'mon,” I said to Serenity, as I trotted over to the far end of the field. “Lets get this over with.”

“I can't wait to get started, but first let me set a few rules.” Serenity stood between us, hopping on top of the soccer ball and steadying it with her magic, “It's of utmost importance that there are no unfair advantages. So no wings, no magic, and no heaving around huge dangerous guns.”

“Subtlety is not huge.” It was a perfectly sized weapon, thank you very much.

“It's the biggest motherfucking gun I've ever seen,” Flare said, waving his arms around to demonstrate. “It makes you look like a huge silver tank that explodes shit. Also, Subtlety is a dumb name.” Oh, he did not just go there. I was seriously going to soccer the shit out of him.

“I'm not taking Subtlety off.” We were standing in some random dirt field with two dead trees across from each other as goal posts, and we could be attacked at any time by any number of Wasteland unmentionables. We had moved a considerable distance the day and a half after the tunnel incident, so at least the Baises were not likely to find us.

“Please, Hired,” she said, making her face all pouty. “Pretty please, mo-”

“Fine,” I cut her off. “Not because you did that sad thing you do when you don't get your way. Only on the condition you stop calling me mommy.” She just pouted more. “Stop that. Just agree so we can play.” Then her eyes got all big and watery and tied a knot in my gut. Against my better judgement, I said, “Fine! We'll talk about it later, okay?” Grinning just a bit, she nodded.

Grumbling and taking off Subtlety, I had the distinct feeling I had just been outsmarted by a foal. Again. It seemed that being outsmarted constantly was half of what I did. The other half was, of course, getting captured.

“Any other rules?”

“Uh. First to five points wins, gooooo!” said Serenity, with all the enthusiasm a little filly could muster. Incidentally, a lot.

With that she leapt off the ball and gave it a great kick with her tiny hoof. It went about three feet before rolling to a stop in front of Flare. Not wasting any time, the blue pegasus was off with a blur, kicking the ball faster and faster with each step. He was moving so fast he was almost hard to keep track of. Damn pegasi.

I ran over to intercept him as Serenity tried to run her way back down the field. The pegasus was far too fast for me, and zipped easily past me. Turning as fast as I could, I reached out with my mouth and grabbed onto the tattered remains of Flare's jumpsuit. There was a slight tug and then a tear as his worn

jumpsuit finally gave way and ripped right off revealing his naked blue body. After having seen him always wearing clothes, it looked a little obscene.

With a kick, the soccer ball flew through the air, ricocheted off our goal tree, and flew back smacking Flare in the face with a thud and a wail. So far the score was: 1 – Flare, 0 – Serenity and Silver Storm, and 1 – for soccer kicking our collective asses.

Patting Flare on the back, I said, “Stop being a wimp.” Looking down at his flank for a second, I continued. “What is that supposed to mean?” I motioned to the open book tattooed on his flank.

“Huh. Fuck, you finally saw it?” He sighed heavily and fakely. “I’ve been trying to hide it. It ain't very badass, is it? I was hoping for like a grenade, or an explosion, or an exploding grenade!” That was all well, but didn't answer the actual question. “It's for my story tellin'. When I was just a little buck, me and a few other pegasi accidentally fell through the floor of the Enclave base into the Dise tunnels. We were young and weren't good fliers so we couldn't get out, and nopony know we were there. So we had to find our own way out. Well, we know how bad those tunnels can be. So I helped keep the tension down by telling stories about our old teacher's farts--” Serenity giggled. “--and how they saved the world from Discord. When we finally were found and returned, I also found my cutie mark.”

“It looks stupid,” I said dully.

“So? And what do those rocks on your flank mean?” he nickered at me. “Were you an expert slingshot-er? Did you used to eat rocks? Well, its gotta be somethin', and I'm fresh outta ideas.” With a final grin, he trotted across the dirt field after our soccer ball.

If you are curious as to where we found a functional soccer ball: Serenity found a deflated one, and used a lot of her spare time as we travelled fixing it up. It's fairly easy to fix things up when you don't have to walk yourself, and I was sure magic helped as well. For once though, she was not riding on my back out of laziness, but because she was wounded enough I forbade her from tiring herself out. We were all wounded of course; it had been over a day since the tunnel, but without healing potions our wounds kept. Flare, for his part, could still barely keep off the ground never mind the flying tricks he usually preformed just to have a simple conversation.

I was mostly fine though. The wound on my flank had scabbed, as had the cut along my chest. Though sometimes, if I closed my eyes, I heard the wind whispering to me. I knew, for sure, that this time it was just my imagination but...

This soccer game was honestly more about keeping us active and making sure we were prepared for a raider attack than anything else. Well, I saw it that way. Both Flare and Serenity claimed it was 'Fun'. I was mostly adverse to the idea of fun, but I was outvoted.

“Stop it stallin', slowpoke.” Serenity ran past me, the sun shining on her smiling face. Sometimes it was hard to believe it was actually back. I could see it shining down upon our game, but even looking at it... it was unreal. The pegasi closed up the sky 200 years ago, and there was no way it could be back now. Not without a miracle, and if there was one thing I learned in the wasteland, it was not to trust miracles. “HIRED!” Serenity squealed stomping her little hoof. “We're playing! Can't let Stupid get another point!”

“Right.” Nodding my head, I was off. The ball was back in the middle of our makeshift field so I charged at it. Flare nearly got there first, but I dove. The edge of my hoof kicked the ball, sending it rolling just out of his reach. He turned fast, but Serenity was already there kicking the ball ahead of her, and doing her damndest not to trip.

She failed. While she was running along, the ball slipped under her hoof and sent her tumbling over it with an “Oof.” Flare started to zip past her, but slowed down to see if she was okay. Just enough time

for me to grab his tail with my mouth before he zoomed off again. His chin smacked against the ground as he fell. I caught up to the ball, and pushed it forward and kept on running.

The recently-recovered Serenity called out to me as she ran alongside. Not worrying about the fact that a filly could run as fast as me, I kicked up the ball towards her. Suddenly, Flare jumped out of nowhere. He dove towards the ball with his wings outstretched. Inching closer as if in slow motion, he made a grab for the ball.

And missed.

He slammed into the ground with a shower of dirt. Serenity jumped up and lowered her head into the ball, hitting it with a thick thud. When she landed back on the ground Serenity grinned to herself and leaned forward to watch the ball. Tilting her head in confusion, she turned to me. "Did it hit?"

I chuckled. It took only a slight tug to slide the impaled ball off of her horn. Letting the ball deflate and fall to the ground I said, "Looks like it's game over." Serenity groaned, rubbing the area around her horn with her hoof, and murmured an apology.

"Welp." Flare grinned pulling his face out of the dirt (or more accurately: pulling his face out with the dirt). "I guess that means I win."

"No."

That was not a voice I recognized. Turning to the sound, I saw a whole gaggle of metal ponies. "We win." One of the ponies stepped forward. She was completely unrecognizable from the rest due to their similar power armour, but that huge ass gun on the back made it clear to me she was in charge.

So I did what I always did when faced with impossible odds. "Fuck off." I stepped forward and glowered at the Steel Ranger. I had met them once before way up north somewhere, and I was not in the mood for their dickery. "We're trying to play soccer."

The helmeted pony turned her head to me. I imagined she raised her eyebrow. "The fuck are you?" The pony shook its head. "We have been ordered to take Captain Flare, and any travelling companions, into custody, by orders of Elder Chunky Soup." Really? That was a dumb name. "Comply and you will be spared until your guilt or innocence can be determined."

I moved to fire Subtlety. Only to clack my teeth together hard as the bridle, and battle-saddle, were still lying in a heap. I knew I shouldn't have taken them off. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew Flare was adding this to the list of times I was captured. Even though it was totally his fault because he...

"Captain Flare?"

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*"... Can you feel that, Dise? Does it warm your very soul? It's a new day and still the sun is with us, and ain't that just glorious? They say no news is good news, but in this case, news is also good news. The NCA Chairpony has reached a non-hostility agreement with the Minotaur Chieftain under the belief that we have reached a new era, and peace should reign. A bit sappy if you ask me. The Minotaurs still deny the slaughter at the South Canyon Base, but have offered their condolences. In related news, the NCA council has voted 10/10 to declare 'Sunshine Day' as a holiday across all NCA States, and the four gangs of Dise have ratified the decision as well, with Mayhem taking his place as the new head of The Mustangs.*

*"In other news, bodies are still being counted from the horrific battle that exploded a few nights ago.*

*In addition to the dozens of Mustangs and Baises killed outside The Moon, including former leader of The Mustangs, Roy, multiple civilian casualties were confirmed after the fighting spilled over into the Dise Residential area near the eastern wall. Finally, a NCA guard stationed on the wall fell to his death when an explosion shook the wall.”* That would be my bad.

I walked along solemnly as chains clinked between my legs. They were tight enough so I couldn't run, but could still walk, though slowly and carefully. As we marched, the Steel Rangers seemed more interested in Flare than me. They had him chained heavily, with four knights flanking him, and had his injured wings tied to his chest with rope. All I got was a single guard stalking beside me. Serenity was, thankfully, allowed to ride on said guards back, though her hooves were tied together so she could barely move at all. Who knew, the filly could be dangerous. She cried at killing an insane ghou, the idea of her taking down a Steel Ranger was just silly.

*“Confusion still reigns over the nature of Roy Mustang’s death.”* We were lead up a rutted path on a hill not far from where we were captured. While not permitted to talk, I was given full permission to play my pipbuck as loud as possible. I had avoided it since the tunnel, worried about the effects of the battle, but anything was better than angsty silence. *“Molly of the Baises has denied responsibility for the death, claiming she was attempting to bring Roy in alive for his alleged murder of peaceful power-plant workers a few weeks ago.”*

As we crested the hill I saw something off the left side. Sunlight bounced off the structure, making me wish I'd put on my sunglasses before being captured. Off in the distance the structure cut into the sky like a skinny, white knife, with wisps of clouds surrounded its tip.

*“Mayhem, who has taken up the role of leader of The Mustangs, said, and I quote, 'Molly's excuse is laughable'. In his opinion Molly was clearly pulling an assassination strike against the former leader, and claims the real question is whether she was working alone or with NCA backers.”*

There was a burst of static before the the familiar voice of Mayhem played over my pipbuck. *“No, I’m not saying the NCA put out a hit on Roy. Alls I am saying is The Mustangs and NCA have never gotten along, ya dig? And if the Baises are honest, and only wanted him alive, then who else in Dise would want our noble leader dead?”* You would, I thought spitefully, And me. *“It shames me to say we were woefully unprepared for Molly's treachery, and our hotel has been damaged considerably. If water prices get higher soon, I hope your listeners don't blame the Mustangs, not after everything we’ve done to keep it running, even after multiple attacks against our ponies and character.”*

Mr. New Haygas was back. *“Bored already? Well don't turn the channel just yet, because the news is done, and it's time for your favourite tunes! Brought to you 200 years after their popularity killed the world.”*

“End to the hostilities,” my guard scoffed to the side of me, “my bloody hoof.” She was a female, and through her armour that was all I could tell. Even with it, I was a fair bit taller than her, but she had guns, and they had taken Subtlety from me. “This. This is nothing but an armistice for a week, Maybe two, a month if we're lucky, but there will be war.” The mare looked at me, her helmet's eyes glowing, “The NCA got megaspelled.”

I said nothing, ignoring her. Not being permitted to speak made it difficult to comment on such things. “You wanna know what I think?” I nodded dumbly, keeping my eyes on Serenity who somehow managed to sleep on my guards metal back. She could sleep anywhere. “Well, the Chairpony of the Council is from Sandy Stifle, and they want to end the war. Can't vote yes to war right as the sun comes back, oh no. He'd be lynched. He's waiting till they attack first.”

“They did.” I nearly gasped as Serenity murmured on the Ranger's back, not as asleep as she seemed. “Heard on the radio.” Apparently she did not get the “no talking” memo.

“Ah, you're a smart little one.” Serenity smiled proudly, though her eyes stayed closed. “No pony knows what caused the megaspell to go off. Most ponies assume minotaurs, but the minotaurs haven't seriously attacked any pony for years. So why now? 'Less the minotaurs get aggressive, and aggressive that can't be denied, ain't nothing going to happen.”

“So?” I figured the ban on talking was lifted.

“So, means the NCA will trigger the war without telling their respective cities, get it? Force the minotaurs to attack. Then boom. World goes to shit, and Celestia above can see how we ponies eat each other alive.” I imagined she was smiling at me, but really, who could tell?

“You seem to be helping.” I said, as deadpan as I could go.

“Not my job to help.” Of course, she was what, only a knight? Way I heard it, you had to be at least a Paladin to have an opinion. “I take my orders and complete them without question,” she sighed, looking off past the hill we were cresting. Behind us, I could still see the huge grey walls of Dise and the buildings that peeked over it. The giant pink pony head seemed to be staring at me from across the wasteland... not creepy at all. Turning back to my guard, I saw what she was looking at.

Off in the distance and slightly right-ish was a large compound with small grey walls. The vast complex seemed to have a series of buildings lined up along the edges of the walls, while in the centre it looked like rows of green things were lined up in rows. It was very, very confusing so I sorta looked away.

“The NCA farm,” the Steel Ranger chuckled. “Used to be the Baises’, but it never grew as much as needed. Apparently the NCA knows a little something of farming in these radiation-blighted lands, some secret or what have you; they think to use it to buy Dise's membership into the NCA.”

“How interesting.” I said, trying to suppress a yawn. Why did ponies always lecture at me? Was it so much to ask to be allowed to do a job without some pony feeling it necessary to explain in minute details the exact political strategies involved? I didn't care about the NCA, their farms, or their allies. I just wanted to escape these steel assholes, find the nearest NCA outpost, and collect my bounty for killing Roy.

Also, I would like to go a day without being captured.

That would be nice, but even with Celestia above smiling down on me, I don't think she liked me enough to grant my wish.

“Are we there yet?” Serenity complained, after a few minutes of pipbuck music. I was honestly wondering the same thing too. As much fun as it was to be a captive wandering the wastes, I couldn't wait until we got to wherever it was we were going so I could escape already.

“Soon.” She smirked a bit (I assumed. Damn masks did nothing for facial expressions) as the whole group stopped. “We need to blindfold you.”

For fuck's sake.

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We were marched for what felt like miles, and, chances are, it was. In the dark, I wasn't able to see much of anything (occasionally sending shivers down my spine as it reminded me of that tunnel), but I could feel. Contrary to popular belief, my brain worked perfectly fine, as did all my senses. The wind was blowing south when we walked and tussled up my hair, so I knew that when we started walking downhill and the wind stopped blowing that we had travelled down the north side of the hill. I knew by the feeling under my hooves that we moved off the dirt and onto pavement, and judging by the fact we did not walk very far before going inside, I'd to guess it was little more than a small store off some

main road. Perhaps a rest stop, with a secret backdoor.

That's right, I planned ahead. Eat your heart out doubters. I can, in fact, learn.

From there, we walked down, and down, and down. I felt a twinge of anxiety in my gut as we continued descending. I know I have been bringing up my travels into the dark a lot recently, but that sort of thing is not something that leaves you quickly. It had only been a few days, and I'd a feeling the memories would haunt me for long after. Or I'd go insane. Either way worked if you asked me. Since I was a child I'd always been just a step away from insanity, so I was kind of interested to see the other side.

We were led through a series of musty smelling rooms, something between rotten paper and stale air, before being led into a room that very definitely smelled like manure. Of course that would be our jail cell, because c'mon? How obvious was that? They could have at least put in an air freshener so we would be surprised at the horrid state of our apartments.

Of course, when the blindfold was removed and artificial light blinded my eyes, I was surprised. Not by the fact that our cell was dirty, and we had a just bucket to shit in, but by the fact Serenity was nowhere to be seen.

I turned, and pressed my face against the nearest Steel Ranger's mask. "Where. Is. She?" There was no room in my voice for questioning.

"W-while she is here she is not your con-"

"Where. Is. She?" I repeated. If he thought for a second this was a show and I was just posturing, then I was going to rip open his tin can head.

"I s-said."

"Where!"

"Upstairs." He pushed me away roughly and took a second to regain his composure. "Her wounds are being looked at and treated, and she will be given proper boarding for her duration so long as she does not cause trouble. You are our captives, but our directive stops us from harming foals, or putting them in deplorable conditions." He shoved me roughly.

After all that was through, I was shoved into my cage. The whole dirty room was cut in half by a row of rusty steel bars. My part had such lovely amenities like a pile of rags for a bed, a shitting bucket, and what appeared to be a half eaten mole-rat. Dinner, maybe?

The other side of the room was lovingly equipped with the stairs higher into the compound, a table with a single seat and a large overhanging light. Classic interrogation style, if I was any judge, and seeing as I'd spent plenty of time in The Room during my employment with The Mustangs, I'd say I was a good judge. The whole room seemed similar to a Stable-style complex but more concrete cleanness than metal and stone 'we're totally not evil at all'-ness.

As befit their stupid attempt at intimidation, two more Steel Rangers came down the steps dragging Flare along. As befit Flare's character, he grinned all the way to the table as they slammed him onto the seat. His head slumped dramatically as the light was positioned over his head.

"OH CELESTIA!" he screamed a second later, his wings poofing out dramatically! "It was me! I did it! I never meant to, I was forced! Please, please don't hurt me! I'll tell you! Tell you everything please noooooo!" He squealed and squirmed, and I tried to stifle a chuckle. The two guards who had dragged him down took their places on either side of Flare, while the one who pushed me into my cell paced at the other end of the table from Flare.

He took each step solemnly and slowly, as if to contemplate the meaning and purpose of each step. The type of actions designed to make the watcher nervous, to show that this was a pony who knows what he meant to do. With a smooth movement, the helmet hissed, and he carefully lifted it off his head, and placed it on the table. Inside he turned out to be a bright pink stallion (I snickered) with a short cropped green mane, with a hilariously drooping moustache. Serenity would have liked him.

“Tell me,” he said, his voice much higher now that his mask was off, “Tell me everything.”

“Okay.” Flare gasped, stomping his fore-hooves on the table, and bringing his wings back to bear.

“Come closer.” The mustachioed stallion leaned in, his pink coat glowing slightly in the light. “Closer.” He leaned closer. “I...I..”

He paused dramatically.

“Stole the cookie from the cookie jar!” I chuckled from off to the side, and he burst out laughing. “It was me! I did it! You finally caught me. It’s the noose, I expect.” He rubbed his chin, grinning at his own wit. “Might I say, that moustache suits you. Says, ‘I may be a pretty filly, but I am also badass’. Really. Trust me.” He snickered, and furrowed his brow.

The steel ranger slammed his hooves down, cracking the table. “I AM PALADIN CURLY FRIES, AND YOU WILL SHOW ME RESPECT!” Flare lasted all of three seconds in silence before bursting out laughing making the Stallion's moustache twirl in rage. “Enough,” he sighed.

There was a thud and a gasp as one of the steel rangers put an iron hoof into Flare's gut. He coughed and grinned, as Curly Fries glowered from across the table. “Don’t you fuck with me,” the pink stallion said, his voice low in rage. “I know who you are.”

“Flare,” Flare reminded the his interrogator. “So I guess you heard the stories right? Listen, it’s not true. Okay, so maybe I killed one or two knights with my giant swinging co-” and another armoured hoof. This time the blow sent him slamming into the table, blood dripping from his mouth. “Okay. I lied just a tiny bit.”

“Do you think you're funny?”

“He is funny.” I said just loud enough to be heard from my cage.

“You're next, cunt,” Curly Fries said, waving a hoof at me but not bothering to give me a glance. “As for you, Flare, you will talk.” I resisted the overwhelming urge to mention that he had been talking. Just not saying anything. “What are the Enclave planning?”

“Lots, and more.” He waved his arms. “Gonna have a potluck, week after Friday! Everyone's invited, you shoul-” Another iron hoof sent him reeling and grinning. “What did you expect?”

“Information. And then your death.” Curly Fries laughed. “After what you did to the Steel Rangers five years ago.” Five? That didn't make much sense, just how old was Flare? “I was there. I saw you killing innocents! CHILDREN!” Flare visibly grimaced, and I was more confused than ever. “And now you stand here acting like we're the bad guys.”

“Yeah.” Flare smiled through bloody teeth. It was a grim smile, and it looked horrifying and foreign on his face. “Hah, funny story, that. Steel Rangers spent their days sniping us back at the mountain, we go down try to ward you off, and we're called foal killers.”

“You are.”

“Yup.” His smile waned and he grimaced. “I remember. Don't get me wrong, Mr. Moustache, I remember. You should too; you were there. We gave you a fucking warning. Told you fuckers to piss off or there'd be war. Told you that if you didn't want casualties to move your non-combatants. You

didn't. We attacked. I had good aim." He shook his head. "That wasn't a funny story, but it changes nothing." He leaned forward. "Your side used foals as shields."

"And yet. You still attacked, you murderous bastard."

"Aww, you wound me." He put a hoof over his heart. "You've had five years, and this is what you come up with? You're as silly as you look, and you look fierce silly. Besides," Flare flipped his mane, "you think the Remnants forgot what the Steel Rangers did back when we first lost the sky?"

Everything goes back and back, doesn't it? The Steel Ranger hated the Remnants, who hated the wasteland ponies, and all our sins and rivalries can be traced back in the annals of history. Minotaurs killed some NCA, now the NCA kill them back. Zebras kill ponies, ponies kill zebras, war flares, bombs drops and after the end, the presence of our forefathers is felt, and the wounds still burn deep, but after so long, who could even remember what the war was about? In the end, violence begat more, and I had to wonder if it was worth it. If maybe all this hate and violence wasn't solving anything, and never would. I'm not a smart pony, but I couldn't help but feel that all these factions and allies and grudges over who flag you're under solved nothing. That maybe, just maybe, each pony should be judged by who they were, not who they served.

Of course that was silly, cliché, and trite. The world wasn't that simple, but it was nice to think it was.

"Don't quote history at me, you colt," Curly Fries grumbled and stormed as he paced back and forth.

"Tell me what the Enclave is planning and I will give you a quick death. You have already been found guilty of murder, but its the least I can do to make your passing easy."

Flare leaned back on his chair. "Slow is fine."

"You're fucking with me."

"Nope." Flare squirmed in the chair for a second, perhaps wondering why they always seemed made to be as least comforting as possible. Almost like they weren't made for ponies at all. "See, I'm not dumb. Hired Gun there is a brick with fewer IQ points, but I got the brains of the operation. Also I'm much funner. I basically have all the best traits, anyway. You see, I think you'll kill me any damn way you please no matter what I say. Talking won't do anything but give you information. So, Fuck. Off."

It seemed that it was the day of epiphanies because I realized something. No matter what I thought of Flare, he was still a solidier. He was trained, presumably since birth, to fight and do solidery things. Among those I could imagine were to stay calm under pressure (his actions in the tunnel shocked me. When he wasn't punching me for freaking out he was telling stories and joking to keep our minds easy...) and withstand interrogation. The entire time I had known him, he had been doing silly things, so much so I had forgotten who he was and where he'd come from.

"Will you still act that way if I take knives to your marefriend?" He pointed dramatically at me.

I let Flare do my laughing for me. "Marefriend! MAREFRIEND!" He kept chuckling even as a kick sent him spiralling off his chair and bleeding. "You fucking kidding... she's ... fuck, she wouldn't fuck me if the wasteland depended on it. She's some sorta fillyfooler, you dolt. Hah. Fucking marefriend. You're great. We should be a comedian team. I'll tell the stories, you tell the pu-"

He was unceremoniously lifted up and thrown into my cage. As he rolled into the shit bucket, the door slammed behind him and locked shut. "Hey." I said, walking up to the Curly Fries. "Only one bed and bucket."

"Share," he growled, motioning for the two Steel Ranger guards to stay put. With a huff he stormed up the steps burning from ear to ear. I didn't really care about the slop bucket, I just thought the whole thing was hilarious.

Flare slowly rose to his feet and grinned at me. Feeling strangely euphoric, I smiled back, and that made him burst out in laughter. I even chuckled. Just a tiny little bit. When he got himself back under control, we had actual work to do. We were stuck in some Celestia-forsaken bunker, awaiting torture and death by some ponies who weren't bad, just desperate. If I was to guess, anyway.

"They're not so tough." Flare mocked to out silent guards. "A Spark Grenade, or a Spark Pulse Emitter, turns those suits of theirs into little more than fancy weights. Most can't even move."

"A what?" I sat down in what was the closest approximation to a bed we had.

"Its like... a tazer gun. A short pulse from it and ZAP, their armour is deader than Roy Mustang. Steel Rangers stole a bunch a while back, 'long with some energy weapons. They've been trying to reverse engineer Enclave tech, might have a few lying ar... OH! Once we escape we should totally look for some. It'd be awesome. Fuck those bastards or something." We might at that.

A gun of Steel Ranger slaying in the Steel Ranger lair, what are the odds?

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Time passed as it often did: slowly and with great amusement as it made the ponies that followed it wait.

I'm not sure if that last sentence made sense, but what I was trying to say it that time passed slowly. Me and Flare took turns pacing, being hungry from barely eating since the tunnel, doing nothing, and using the bucket (at which time the other turned around and whistled loudly, pretending they were not there) so overall it was a lovely time. At least we weren't being chased by ghouls or assaulted by daydreams. In comparison, I guess you could say it was a good day.

"So." I broke the silence. Not because I disliked the silence, any silence with Flare around was to be treated like a rare gem, but because I had to know something and it wasn't going to stop nagging at my mind until I asked. "What happened at..." I groped uselessly for words.

"Bitter Steel Camp." Flare seemed to read my mind, something that happened with an odd frequency by folks around me. I was not a subtle pony. "The foals right?" Yes, the battle Curly Fries spoke of. Of Flare slaughtering foals.

"Did you know they were there?" I gulped, as I asked. Part of me didn't really want to know the answer. As much as Flare annoyed me, the hyper pegasus had grown on me. It would have sucked, having to kill him.

"Yes." My muscles twinged at the reaction, and I was sure he noticed. My ears roared in rage, but I kept myself controlled. I could not abide the killing of foals, by anypony. It was... not right. "And no. Let me explain." He gulped, and I took a step back, cursing myself ever so slightly.

"It ain't a story I like telling, and I'm a stallion of many stories." He flapped his injured wings for a second and sighed. "I... we sent them a warning a week in advance. We told them to leave or die, we told them if they insisted on fighting they should remove their children. We tried, and tried, and... I thought they listened." He voiced faded and he shook his head. This was not a Flare that I was comfortable with, his voice was sour and dark.

"We attacked at dawn. The morning rain was letting out, and a thick fog blanked the camp. Sail had told me the nightly reports. Lights were seen in the night leaving the camp, and I was so happy they'd heeded our warning." He shook his head. "The Steel Rangers wouldn't leave, but the children.... So we flew. My squad was to hit the flanks and take out supply depots." There was a sad smile on his lips, and tears welling in his eyes. "We did well. My squad took out ten rangers. Zapped them with spark grenades and blew them to pieces with guns and Bunker Buster. So we went to our secondary

objective.”

“It was a plain building. A store before the war, but we knew they used it as an intelligence and weapons depot for the tech that they 'liberated' from uncivilized wastelanders. So...” He sniffled and rubbed his eyes. “Bunker Buster took it out. A pretty fireball, and I couldn't have been happier. I was going to be promoted to captain, my squad did well, with no casualties. Then I saw him.”

He shuddered but kept talking. “The colt running from my blaze. His mane was on fire and he screamed so loud. They kept their children in the same fucking place they kept their bombs!” He screamed, his pink eyes bloodshot and wet with tears. “I killed them... I...” He wiped a tear from his eye. “Yeah... I killed them. I got my promotion, but... I never wanted it after. I heard that scream.... For the rest of my life I'll wake up and hear that scream. It's in my dreams.” Was that what he heard down in the tunnel? That scream? “I got a medal, commendations. General Skylight gave me a pat on the back. Then I went back into my room and... and let a part of me die.”

He sniffled and looked up at me, the memories clear in his eyes. It felt like I'd been there. Felt the explosions ripple through my body. Smelled the smoke. Heard the scream.

Against my better judgement, I wrapped my good hoof around his neck. And I hugged him.

Part of me hated him for killing foals, but I couldn't kill him. He was doing a better job of it than I ever could.

Ponies have stories right? Sometimes I forgot that. Behind the eyes of each and every pony I met there was a long and detailed tale I couldn't remember, even if I had the chance. Yet it was always there, and it drove them. Sometimes, you meet so many ponies you forget they had a life before, that they existed and did good and evil. They lived, and died, and bore the scars. When you live in the wasteland, everypony has a tragic backstory.

So that was Flare's. I guess it made sense, and while I was sure there was more to that, bringing a pony to tears was not something I enjoyed doing. Once, after cutting my head open by accident, my mother had told me that big ponies weren't supposed to cry, and I should get all my tears out when I was still a foal. She was lying of course; big ponies cried all the time. I wasn't a smart pony, but I understood why she had to lie. When you're foal, you have to believe in the big ponies, you had to latch onto something and proclaim it strong and just, even if it wasn't. Because you weren't given anything else to believe in.

When I let go of Flare, he smiled up at me. As much fun as waxing poetic was, I think I was out of juice for the day.

“Okay,” Flare said, smiling brightly. “Hired Gun!” he said dramatically, so I would forget about his previous bout of emotions. “It is time for you to tell me your tragic backstory! I know you ha-”

“Wait,” a guard turned sharply and studied me from under his helmet. “Hired Gun?” That's my totally not fake name. I raised an eyebrow at the guard and nodded. “I remember you... you were guarding a caravan up north right?” I nodded again. “I heard they all got wiped out... how did you *survive*?”

“Who are you?”

“I'm Backlight.”

“Come again?”

“Knight Backlight.”

“Sorry, it doesn't ring a bell.” I shrugged. “I survived by luck... why?”

“I... It's nothing.” He squirmed under his armour as his fellow guard gave him a look. “Just. Surprised. Is all... whatever.” I liked him. He amused me, and better yet he allowed me to avoid telling Flare

anything. I would rather not think about what happened. Which was a lot to not think about.

“Knight Backlight.” I grinned up at the stairs as the pink stallion came walking down the stairs, now dressed in Paladin robes instead of his usual power armour. “Do not speak to prisoners.” He glided down the stairs with the grace of a Brahmin, and strode up to the Knight. “Are we clear?” The knight nodded.

“Hired Gun, so that's your name?” he strode up to our cage, and wrinkled his nose at the smell.

“Sure.” I kicked my metal leg idly, hoping he had a point.

“Tell me. This filly we have upstairs.” My shoulder burned suddenly. My eyes darted around the room. Curly Fries was facing me, but the two guards were facing the stairs. Crap, that wasn't good.

Without thinking I grabbed Flare with both hooves and drove him into the ground. “LET HER GO!” I screamed. “OR I KILL HIM!” He gasped, but did not squirm. Shaking him, I smacked his head against the floor ever so lightly. “I swear!”

Everypony turned to look at me. The two guards scrambled to get the keys, but Curly knocked them away and bellowed orders. The door to our cage swung open and Curly was in front of me shouting something I didn't hear. My eyes were fixed on the stairs. The two guards were facing me, backing up slowly to the stairs, as if ready to run for help. “I WILL!” Had to give it a few more seconds.

The burning continued as a brown blur jumped from the stairs. It landed on the first guard who let out a wordless scream. A green energy pulsed from a weapon in its pink magical grasp sending the Knight to its knees, its armour de-activating. The second turned just in time to get lasered in the face by the spark pulse emitter. The small pony in the brown robe turned to me and took off its hood grinning.

Serenity's magic was keeping the knights silent. I loved that resourceful filly.

“Just kidding.” I let Flare flop to the floor gasping for air.

“What's that?” Flare pointed suddenly. Curly fries turned and saw the two ponies with my pink filly waving her spark emitter. It wasn't going to work against Curly without his suit, but I'd other plans.

“Catch!” I said. Curly turned to me again, his eyes wide in confusion. I kicked the manure bucket sending it, and its brown contents, over his face.

“What is this I-” I bucked him into the cage, his head ringing in the bucket. The pink body of Curly Fries slumped to the ground, apparently passed out, as brown gunk slithered out of the bucket on his head. Not wasting anymore time, I ran over to the two fallen knights and threw them in the cage as well, before locking it. I didn't know how that pulse emitter whatever worked, but without their suits being active they were basically helpless. They were too heavy to move on their own.

“Sorry, Backlight.” I grinned as the door locked. “We'll meet up again later.”

Alright, Operation 'Get the Fuck Out' was ready to begin. Smiling, I ruffled Serenity's mane with my hoof causing her to giggle and squirm away. “Nice job. Where'd you get all that?” She was wearing a plain brown robe with a hood, completely unadorned with anything, and that boxy looking pulse emitter was still floating in her magic, a string of green electricity pulsing between its two prongs.

“Upstairs!” she chirped. “Stupid ponies put me in some acolyte's room. He was toying with this magical thingy, and even told me what it did! That silly. So when he wasn't looking I stole it and snuck out.” Easy when you had noise nullifying magic. “The robe I found on the top floor. So much stuff! I found Subtlety and Bunker Buster, and all our stuff just thrown in a heap! Can you believe it? This escape is going to be so easy.”

Right, easy.

“Hey,” Serenity bounced, “how did you know I was coming?”

“Yeah,” Flare said, rubbing his neck with a hoof. “I was curious too. Thought you were going to fuck me up for a second there.”

Tapping my metal leg with my... uh non-metal leg, I said, “Felt it.” Serenity raised an eyebrow. “I don't know. My shoulder burned and it was.. familiar. I'm not sure, but I knew it was Serenity's magic. Right?”

Flare stared blankly at me and turned his head to gape at Serenity, before looking back at me. “She can... do that? FEEL magic like a damn unicorn or something? Innit, like, not an Earth Pony thing?” Maybe he was upset that an earth pony got cool powers, for once. “She can really do that? Really. Are you guys fucking with me, 'cause that would just be mean.”

Me and Serenity shared a smile. Well, time to leave, and it wouldn't be soon enough.

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Three gears stood in the middle of the picture, each ringed about a magical spark. Through the picture's centre a sword struck upwards, blue wings flying out from either side. It was a bit... fancy for my tastes. I preferred something I could sink my teeth into, like the NCA's five legged pony. This thing I was standing before was a symbol I couldn't remember even if I was a smart pony. Maybe that's why they felt the need to plaster the symbol every five meters inside the compound?

Outside the cell, stairs led to a large room, which I had to guess was for conferences. That room was long, with a huge table and many seats surrounding it. We were lucky; it was also completely empty. Turning away from the stupid-looking symbol, I strolled up and down the length of the table looking for something... anything. I was not much of a curious pony, but I found myself in the precarious position of possibly having useful information.

There was little-to-nothing to find, save for a single scrap of paper at the head of the table. With my usual weary sigh, I leaned over and read it, my words mouthing what was written out of habit. “Meeting notes: We argued about how we always argued. Nothing was accomplished.

Elder Chunky Soup”

I was the paragon of finding useless crap. You know how in the stories, if somepony found a piece of paper lying on the ground it would always be a clue that turned out to be key in solving the puzzle... apparently, my luck was not so fabled.

“Well, Serenity, you know the way?” She nodded confidently under her brown cloak, the hood firmly over her head. There was exactly no reason for her to have stolen that thing, and frankly it looked silly, but being shrouded amused the filly, so I couldn't tell her no.

“It's this way!” she said, confidently trotting over to the far wall. Two doors flanked either side of the wall, and I had a feeling they both led to the same room. “Just gotta go through this an-”

The door slid open.

With a squeak, Serenity bolted back and found a perfect hiding spot behind Flare. The spark flare... gun thing... The spark pulse emitter (nailed it) was smooth in my mouth, my front teeth precariously holding onto the trigger button. Somepony walked through the door and I stepped forward with my very best glare. “Stand down.” I muffled before even getting a look at the pony.

He was hardly a threat: an Elderly pale red pony with only the barest wisps of grey mane clinging to his skull. He was wearing a blue and yellow robe that had the Steel Ranger symbol adorning the back, and he didn't seem at all surprised to see me. He walked forward just enough to let the door slide shut.

“There was a time,” the ageing stallion said, his voice quivering, “when we had no need for cells or dungeons.” When he shook his head, the extra skin on his neck flapped. “I supposed you killed Curly then?”

“No.” I said simply. “Though he's worse for wear... wait, I said stand down!” I got back into my fighting stance and glowered at the stallion.

“Or you'll hurt an old stallion... how chivalrous.” Serenity giggled and peaked out from behind Flare. “Ah, Captain.” He gave a mocking bow to the blue pegasus. ““You took longer than I expected... though perhaps you were biding your time?” Biding our... I glanced down at the pipbuck and realized just how late it was. Nearing midnight, so without a doubt most of the Steel Rangers would be asleep, which boded well. If only I'd actually planned it. “Oh and look, a foal you haven't murdered; there's a shock, indeed.” Flare winced and drew himself back as Serenity looked on oblivious.

“Yeah,” Flare said confidently. “Didn't expect to see you, Elder.” They knew each other? Flare must have seen the look I gave the both of them “Ah, Hired Gun, this is Elder Chunky Soup, head of the Dise regiment of the Steel Rangers.” Oh. I guess I should have expected that.

“Might be the last elder anywhere.” He strode past me as if I wasn't even a threat. “First Red Eyes comes with his slaves to take our headquarters, then these Applejack Rangers split away, then the Enclave come flying in all high and mighty. We've lost contact with the north...” he sighed heavily. “I've drawn our forces back, and my Paladins mock me when they think I don't hear. Such is my burden: I must order a group of unruly children around, even as they scream and bicker. It is for the best.”

“Whatever.” Totally did not care.

“Such an attitude.” The Elder smiled at Flare. “She is a keeper.”

“Say that to her face, I dare you. So, Elder, I was surprised to hear you wanted me arrested. We've talked about Bitter Steel...”

“I do apologize, but I did not expect you or your squad to be anywhere near here. I can see you did not expect to either -- no, don't tell me. I'd rather not know what you're doing with a filly and a cyborg.” I had a name. “It was necessary to placate my Paladins. No one wanted to stop our patrols. They said the public was warming up to us.” He shook his wrinkly head. “They were wrong, but how am I to intrude on such a good delusion?”

“So you sent Curly Fries as our interrogator so we could escape?”

“No. I planned for you to be killed by him.” It felt like a punch to the gut, and I knew nothing good could come of that. “Though,” he sat on one of the chairs, “I don't plan to stop you, but if you get caught, you will die... and please don't kill anypony. Or foals.” He stressed that word. “Especially foals.” He turned his eyes over to Serenity, still half-hiding behind Flare. “Especially that foal.”

“Why?” He raised an eyebrow. “Why let us go?”

“Because, after all these years, I can see a lot in a pony's eyes. More than most. And I got a good look at yours. You see... there is a darkness under Dise. Something black and squirming and begging to be let free.” I felt my coat stick out on ends, and heard the sound of a wind whipping past my ear. “Looking at you... I see it. The blackness, can you feel it? It taints your very soul, but...,” there was the slightest bit of a grin on his muzzle, “but you're strong. You interest me. Maybe you'll fight the poison that eats at the heart of the last city... or maybe not. My Paladins think I am too trusting, and I am inclined to believe them. Still, here's your chance.”

“Uh.” I gave Flare and Serenity my 'get the fuck over here' glare before nodding at Chunky. “Thanks

for... not... killing us I suppose. Or not trying that hard to kill us... or... thanks for whatever it is you did.”

With my usual display of eloquence we left the conference room and entered into what appeared to be an auditorium. The door we entered was directly beside a small wooden stage and podium, and lengthwise down the long room were rows of benches. On the walls were the Steel Ranger emblem; a much larger one was painted directly behind the podium. Walking down the length of the room, Serenity took the lead, ready to cast her awesome magic.

“Well,” I said slowly, “that went better than expected?”

“Who knows.” Flare trotted along slowly beside me, his face a mask of... something. “Don't trust him much... met him a year after Bitter Steel on what was supposed to be a diplomacy mission. We talked privately and came to an understanding but... well, the meeting did not go well. Would be best not to trust Chunky...”

“Right,” I said as we reached the far end of the auditorium and turned to the door on the left wall. Together, we snuck up to it and nudged it open so we could see through but hopefully not be noticed. The hallway on the other side was long and plain (only a few large screens on rickety stands adorning it) with two doors on the right side, and one on the left. It also had the unfortunate amenity of a Steel Ranger slowly patrolling the hall..

Serenity pointed with her hoof towards the one door on the left side. I had to guess that was where the stairs were. The pink filly nodded at me for half a second before I saw a spark of magic on her horn. Way across the hall one of the monitor stands shook slightly in pink magic, and toppled over with a resounding crash. Gritting my teeth, I pushed the door open as the Steel Ranger turned to investigate. At once we three scrambled to the left door, Serenity's magic hiding the sound of our hoofsteps.

The door slammed shut behind us and I let out the breath I was holding.

I was not made for sneaking and crouching. I really wanted my Subtlety back.

Sneaking along quietly, Serenity pointed me to the stairs. Apparently we were on sublevel four, which gave us a long way up before we got back to the outside where we belonged. Being underground was just not something I enjoyed. Traversing the stairs, the three of us did our best to be as quiet as possible without wasting Serenity's precious little energy. Though that was considerably more difficult for me as I had a hunk of metal for a leg.

Climbing the stairs in the dim light, I was happy to note that they seemed to go all the way to the surface level. That would cut down on my sneaking time, and make my life much easier (in retrospect I should have found this suspicious). I did so hate not having my guns and weapons and stuff. I liked shooting things, not sneaking around things. It felt cheap.

I walked confidently past the door on the landing to the third floor, just in time for it to slide open.

My heart stopped. I turned my head to see the flashlight eyes of a Steel Ranger staring at me. Beside me I could feel Serenity and Flare stiffen up as we watched the pony. For a long time no one said anything as we stared down the ranger, waiting for him to attack, giving him the chance. Did he feel lucky? Did he think he could take us? Was he giving us a chance to surrender?

Then a horrible gasping, honking sound was emitted from the pony. He was snoring...

Was he really sleeping?

Seriously?

Quickly, Serenity zipped up and jumped, waving her hooves in front of the pony. Yup, he was totally

sleeping. Facehoofing, I shook my head as my heart calmed down to normal speed. That had to be the stupidest thing I ever- The Steel Ranger twitched.

Serenity squeaked, and we ran to the next landing.

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“Hired...,” Serenity said as we neared the steps to the stairs’ final platform, “are you my momma?”

Silence.

Flare coughed loudly, drawing my brain back out of it's shell. “No,” I said slowly. By the look on her face I knew it was not the answer she wanted to hear. Squeezing my eyes shut for half a second, I steeled myself to her. It tore me up inside but I was not the pony she wanted as a mother. “Is this really th-”

“Hiiiiired,” she whined, and I stopped on the landing halfway between the first and second floors. “Why not?” She was clearly determined to have this conversation now. Flare looked pleadingly at me, but I just shook my head.

“Serenity...” I leaned down to face her eyes to eye. “Please. We'll talk later... but right now we need to go. Okay?”

“Promise?” she asked, a pout on her lips.

“Promise.” That seemed to satisfy her, as she smiled and jumped onto my back.

Slowly, we made our way to the first floor. The doorway led to a small hallway that changed quickly into a four-way split. The four hallways split off the centre, cutting the top floor into four sections. Of course, in the centre of the crossroads was a Steel Ranger standing firmly, his steel ass presently facing us. I knew in my gut that he wouldn't be asleep, so... fuck. I could have taken him out with my spark pulse emitter, but he would cry for help, and I couldn't leave Serenity there, making sure he didn't make a sound, as we searched for the exit.

Looking around, Serenity pointed to a small doorway a few feet away on our left. Biting my lip, I quickly ran through the door in magical silence, with Flare following right behind. Taking a deep breath at our new-found safety, I looked around the room that saved us...

To see rows of beds lining the room, all with sleeping ponies in brown robes. Swearing loudly, I clamped a hoof over my mouth. The magic pink glow was still surrounding us so my words weren't heard, but I didn't know how much longer the filly could keep it up. Turning around, I could see sweat beading down her face and dripping onto my back. On the far end of the room, on the right wall, was another door. Nodding confidently at Flare, I crouched as low as I could and inched forward.

Had it not been for Serenity's magic, my fast-beating heart would have woken up every Steel Ranger in the room. The walk was slow and gut wrenching. The beds were packed together so close, the space between barely had enough room for me. It did not help that they were also a tad small, meaning many ponies’ legs stuck out into the aisle awkwardly. Flare went first and was waiting at the door on the right wall seconds later. Damn that fast pegasus.

My body stopped as I touched a pony’s hoof. Ever so slowly, I turned my head to see the pony. She was a cute green pony with a tussled mane, and she was still sleeping peacefully. Thanking my lucky stars, I continued down the row. By the time I reached the end of the row I was sweating heavily, and I think my heart may have exploded. What I wouldn't have given for the chance just to kick all their flanks and be done with it. Sneaking is stupid.

Flare nickered in magical silence as we opened the door.

Across the hall was another door, but more importantly at the end of the hallway to our right was a (third) door with the word, 'Exit' glowing above it. Freedom. Before moving towards the exit I turned my head towards the Steel Ranger. He was still stupidly staring the same way he had before. Grinning I started for the exit... until Serenity tugged at my mane.

I felt her clamber onto my head and saw a pink hoof stick out over my eye just into my field of vision. Why would she want to go into the room across the hall... because our stuff was there along with whatever else the Steel Rangers had scavenged. It occurred to me that Serenity had said earlier that she had explored this area, by herself, before finding us. She was a much better sneaky pony than I, so it was no wonder she found it. She probably knew the whole layout of the building...

Of course, that also meant she had been overtaxing her magic. That silence spell could not have been easy, especially now she that had to cast it over all of us.

I nodded and quickly sprinted through the door, hearing it slide shut behind me. There was a wicked grin on Flare's face as he caught sight of the room. Piles upon of piles of boxes and crates were stacked up throughout the storage room, all full to bursting with technology and supplies. I had heard that Steel Rangers stole technology and hoarded it, but I was not prepared for it when I saw it.

If only I knew how to use anything more complex than a gun.

After nodding to Serenity to turn her magic off, I followed Flare as he dug excitedly through one of the boxes. Inside there were strangely shaped metal boxes with wires and gem stones and... I'll be honest I'd no idea what he was looking at it. Given that Serenity didn't seem interested the only thing I could tell is that they weren't cybernetic parts.

Those boxes off in the corner, however, were cyber parts. I knew this because as soon as Serenity saw them she zipped off and dove in. Smiling, I trotted up behind her and watched her work through the crate. Cyber leg, cyber leg, something that looked like a spine (that must have hurt), a cyber eye? Who would ever need a cyber eye? The concept just seemed silly to me.

Turning away, I remembered why we had come to this room in the first place. Somewhere, in this mess of dimly lit technology, our gear was stored. Lightly I poked Serenity's head. "Our stuff." She looked up at me, a mess of wires hanging from her mouth.

"Oh yeah!" She let go of whatever it was she had in her mouth and bounded off around a stack of rocket launchers (didn't seem safe, that). I waited for a second until I heard a muffled cry for me to come over. Yeah, it did in fact take me that long to realize the little filly wouldn't be able to carry all our stuff over.

I trotted to where she was, but stopped a few seconds later. Laying haphazardly on top of a pile of... something... was barding. Up 'til then, I'd gotten around wearing... well nothing but my skin and coat. Lifting it with my metal hoof, I studied the garment. The brown barding seemed just a bit worn, but it had a heft to it that told me it was well-reinforced. Its collar was high and stiff with small pockets lining it. Just enough room for a healing potion or two, and much easier than having to reach into my saddle bags. Moreover, it looked exactly my size, if a little tight.

After putting the barding, I looked down at myself and silently approved. It wasn't Steel Ranger armour, but I was getting shot way too much to not wear anything. I tested out one of the front pockets by putting the spark pulse emitter in it.

"Gun!" Serenity said, way too loud. I nudged my barding into a more comfortable position before following after her. It was going to take some getting used to, having something pressed against me at all times, but it was better than, you know, death.

“Serenity.” I then said the silliest thing ever to a pony that could literally turn sound off. “Not so loud.” She looked abashed for a second before pointing me to our supplies, lovingly heaped in a messy pile. From the looks of it, Serenity had managed to find everything, up to and including Subtlety and Bunker Buster. As well as a brand new saddle bag. “Oh.” I poked at it. “For me?”

“Your last one got lost in the dark, remember?” Yeah... I remembered. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw a splash of red, but I didn't look. It was just a scar I had to carry with me. I allowed myself a shudder, then pushed the thoughts from my mind.

“Thanks.” I said, slipping the saddle bags on my back. Then came Subtlety. Between the barding, bags, and gun, I felt almost as tied up as when I wore the dress. The dress that was still sitting in Flare's bags... Gulping, I tried to put Serenity's mind onto something else before she realized that fact.

Spotting a glimpse of pink in the pile of our stuff, I kicked at it. My pink shades flipped through the air majestically, and I tried to make them land on my nose. They did... only upside-down and off-kilter. While Serenity giggled loudly, I quickly fixed my glasses, just in time for Flare to come around the corner, hauling something in his mouth.

“Wha’ I miss?” he mumbled between mouthfuls of electronics. I raised an eyebrow at him and shrugged. “Bomb stuff... gunna be good trust me,” he said after spitting the crap on the ground. “Also!” He flapped his wings happily, and I noticed that the one was missing the hole it had gained in the tunnel. “Found a healing potion... only one, but c’mon, gotta fly.” He flapped his wings a few times and lifted off the ground... for a second until he veered strangely, slamming into a wall.

With an omph, he slid to the ground. “So,” I said, watching him, “Rusty?” He smirked at me and got back to his feet. “Get dressed, quickly.” Rolling his eyes, he nodded and did as I bade him. The lights flickered and I shuddered just a bit. We had stayed too long here, and been too loud. Still, I wanted to stay longer. This room had more than I could ever imagine; just another minute to steal and we would never want for food or protection.

“Thought I heard something.” The metallic voice reverberated through the room and into my core.

I turned around and aimed Subtlety faster than I'd any right to. The Steel Ranger from the cross section of the floor was standing there, his metal eyes shining. “Don't move.” I tried to warn him.

“Normally,” the way his helmet was tilted it almost looked like he was grinning, “I make the thre-”

BANG

The bullet tore through his armoured leg in a splash of gore. With a cry of pain, the Ranger stumbled and fell, his helmet smacking against the floor with a thud.

Serenity was looking up at me, her eyes wide. “Hired, wh-” I lifted a hoof to quiet her down. The Ranger was injured, but he was alive. Elder Chunky Soup begged me to not kill, so I did not. He was, however, somewhat fuzzier on the subject of kneecaps.

“Not now.” I lifted Serenity onto my back and made for the exit. My heart was pounding, but I was confident we would escape. With my gun and I together again, their whole army wouldn't have been able to stop me.

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“Stop right there, crimina-”

Subtlety roared.

One of the two steel rangers guarding the base's facade fell, his leg bleeding and soaking the ground. The second was more proactive, firing rounds from his mounted machine gun at me. Most missed, but I

felt one thunk into my barding, going through before sinking into my chest. Gritting my teeth through the pain I fired two shots.

The first tore the pony's gun from his back, sending scraps over the ground; the second hit the steel leg right above the hoof. Howling curses, she fell as well, her blood mixing in with her partner's. As we started to run, sirens wailed behind us.

"Flare. Re-learn to fly and get the fuck out of here!" We had made it all the way up the stairs into the entrance foyer before the alarm started to ring. When we left, I could have sworn I heard hoofsteps coming up the stairs. The two guards outside had taken too long to incapacitate, and I knew it wouldn't be long before we were caught.

"But I-" Flare started, his head inclining to his duel grenade launchers.

"FLARE!" He nodded briefly and let Serenity onto his back. As she clung tightly to his back, I tried to soothe her by petting her mane down. "Hold tight and be good. I won't be long." She nodded firmly, but I could see her sad grey eyes. She didn't think I was coming back.

The door burst open behind us. Looking back I saw metal ponies with glowing eyes, their guns flashing in the darkness of the night. Yeah, coming back did not seem likely. I smacked Flare on the flank with my metal hoof, and he shot off into the air. I could only pray to Luna the night would conceal him.

Maybe it would have before the sky had cleared. Looking up, I could see the blackness of the sky, but it was not total darkness. Between the clouds, thousands of lights danced like diamonds in the sky. They were bright, but compared to the huge crescent moon their light was paltry. Before the opening of the skies, Flare could have hidden, but Luna above seemed content to mock my efforts.

I stopped as he flew and looked down at my glowing amber pipbuck. Here came the choice. I smacked my dry lips together, wishing I had something to drink... or eat for the matter, but I pushed the feeling away. I was weak from hunger and foggy from thirst, so I wouldn't be able to outrun these guards. At the same time, I knew how to turn my pipbuck light off now so the thin darkness might be enough to hide me if I found a shady area quickly. *Survive*, that ever helpful voice in my head told me. Though... doing that may make them look to Flare's silhouette in the sky, and focus their efforts on him.

Was there ever any doubt?

With my pipbuck still glowing it's orangish light I flew through the night.

My hooves slammed against the concrete, each reverberating strike revealing my position to anypony with a brain.

Bullets zipped past me and faded into the night. Flare had gone left when he flew, so I ran right. I had to draw them away from Flare's flight path, not for long, but for long enough.

In front of me was a small hill with a steep incline I would never be able to climb quickly enough. The mound stretched out horizontally against my trajectory, and when I ran along side it, I was perpendicular to the ponies seeking to kill me. I ran fast but I was still a damn easy target running sideways.

A shot clanged off my metal leg, while another embedded itself into the ground in front of me. I skidded to a stop and tried to turn, only for a bullet to stream past my eyes.

I pivoted and faced my attackers. Five of them with their eyes glowing, but they didn't shoot at me. There was a clicking and a shouted warning for me. Five metal ponies against one cybermare.

My stomach growled in protest, and my throat begged for water. I shook a little on my hooves. This was too much. Too much running, too much hiding. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes. Fuck, what I

wouldn't do for a drink. I promised to return to Serenity, dammit; I couldn't get caught now. I had barely made it any distance at all and now I was trapped. Was this the best I could do?

My eyes shot open, glaring with hatred. No. Fuck them.

I charged, shouting defiance from my parched throat.

A few stepped back as I kicked up dirt. No, they wouldn't expect this. All I could hear was the sound of Subtlety roaring like midnight thunder. Bullets zipped past me, into me, but I kept running and firing. I dimly felt my battle-saddle reloading and I started firing again, and again.

I reached them, bloody and hurt. The first I kicked in the face, sending their head back. My body moved faster as if possessed by some demon, bucking the pony in the neck.

There was a shout of confusion as the pony fell. Not from me, I was euphoric. I ducked a clumsy hoof strike by one pony, and laid down kicks when he stood confused. Subtlety blared-point blank into ponies' legs. Another tried jumping from behind me. I felt their cold weight press against me, pinning me down.

So I bucked them the fuck off. The thrill of the fight consumed me and blinded me to all else.

I don't know how long I fought the five metal giants, I just know that when all was said and done I faced the last at fifty paces.

One of her flashlight eyes glowed while the other was shattered. Had I done that? I... I couldn't remember. All around me four ponies groaned and gasped in pain. None of them dead though... I avoided killing... I promised Chunky Soup and, dammit... it was a promise.

The battle fell from me, and I suddenly felt so very tired. My stomach was complaining its emptiness, and my body was on fire from a dozen different wounds. Subtlety felt like the weight of the world on my back, and I could almost hear my spine cracking under the strain. Fatigue washed over me, and I wanted nothing more than to sleep.

"Give up... and... I'll spare you," the mare gasped under her armour. She sounded tired, and maybe a little impressed. I bit into my bridle, but Subtlety clicked empty. Well... fuck.

"Uh..." I shook the idea out of my head. What part of return to Serenity and don't kill anypony didn't I understand? I was not a clever pony (I'd just charged five steel rangers...) but I wasn't going to break a promise. "Could you?" I said between laboured breaths that stung my chest. "I promised... not to kill anypony."

She laughed. "Even now you persist... you're... impressive."

"Thanks." I intoned, shifting my back leg back a bit. I felt the collar of my barding sway under my unsteady movement, and something inside the pocket hit against my neck.

Wait.

I charged again!

My hooves beat into the dirt in an unsteady stride. Trails of blood followed my hoofprints in the dirt, but I kept running. She jerked in surprise and opened fire. Blood splashed over my face as my ear exploded, but I didn't feel it. The thrill came back. I was deaf to everything else. Time seemed to slow as I jumped. Bullets flashed past me. I reached into the pocket on my barding.

And pulled out the spark pulse emitter.

That's right. I fucking forgot about the Steel Ranger-slaying weapon in a battle with five Steel Rangers!

I was not a clever pony.

I was a fighting pony, though. I landed on top of the poor mare. There was a flash of green energy that engulfed her, glowing in the night like balefire.

I stood over her. "Fuck," she said, unable to move.

I won. I beat them... I...

Collapsed.

Blood pooled around me. I was lying in a lake. Blinking, the pool seemed to edge slowly outwards before getting sucked into the dirt. Beside me I saw the steel ranger struggling with her armour. Things seemed fuzzy, and half-remembered after that. I may have lapped at the blood to parch my thirsty throat, but I... don't remember. Not long after I felt consciousness fade. A blackness consumed me, where there were no stars nor moon to light my way.

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"Over here..."

Somepony said. The voice was fuzzled and obscure.

"I see her... the light... look."

My eyes fluttered open. Everything was so dark I could barely see. The steel pony... where... she was supposed to be there.

"Are you okay?!"

No, she wasn't there... I saw her armour. It was spread all around, scrapped.

Suddenly I was looking in the face of a green unicorn. Wisps of red mane fell over his face. He was pretty. So pretty. Then again, everything looked pretty. Like the stars behind his head, and the way his glasses sparkled. So pretty.

"She lost a lot of blood!" Serenity's voice. Yes I knew it. "Momma needs a healing potion." I saw her face now. Sad grey eyes. They were always so sad. "Healing potions. Please. However many you have."

Something was shoved into my mouth. It tasted bitter, and that meant healthy. How did I know what oranges tasted like?

Wounds knitted together, making me sick to my stomach. I hated that feeling. I would have puked had I eaten anything. Still, my strength was coming back. Slowly.

Things became clearer. Eight ponies surrounded me. Serenity and Flare were two, as well as that green stallion with the straight red hair. The others were strange faces wearing NCA uniforms. Where did they get those... where. My mind cleared, and slowly ponies helped me to my feet.

"Five..." I said slowly. "There were..." I looked around, seeing a single Steel Ranger pony on the ground... dead. There were pieces of armour everywhere but no other ponies. Blood and bullet casings but where... a pony helping me up twitched, sending pain firing up my flank. "Where did they..."

"We saw four steel rangers limping back to their camp," the green pony with the red mane said, his voice smooth and confident. "I'm impressed." He leaned in far too close, and I tried to lift a hoof to strike him but it just sort of, didn't move. Looking down I could dimly see that somepony had removed my legs power source. "The Steel Rangers were too. Left you here. Though maybe they were too weak to drag you. Would explain why they bandaged your wounds."

My head lowered down to Serenity, who smiled hopefully up at me. “Who the fuck is he?”

“High Stakes.” He bowed gracefully. “I am a representative for Mr. House.”

“Mr. Stakes,” one of the NCA ponies helping me up said, “has vouched that you killed Roy Mustang, on the word of Mr. House himself.” The pony looked serious under his helmet.

“Yeah... don't go spreading it around.” So Starscream told House, who told High Stakes. My head hurt.

“Good. The NCA awards your service, and will keep your secrecy.” He smiled. “You're set to be a very rich mare.”

I looked forlornly to where the Steel Ranger headquarters stood. “I'd rather be a living mare.”

High Stakes chuckled. “Worry not, Steel Rangers won't attack any NCA personnel so close to the Farm.” To the farm... yes it was just over the hill... which is where Flare went. Which is where House sent High Stakes to find me, because it was the closest NCA base. Which is why the Steel Rangers won't attack, because they'd be wiped out. Everything made so much sense it hurt my head.

“You.” I pushed the ponies away from me.

“I'd take a step back about now, Stakes,” Flare nickered, spinning so he was floating upside down. Somehow I knew he missed that. “She bites.”

“Fuck off, Flare.” I shook my head as the healing potions did their work. I wasn't back to full health, and I was sure I'd enough bullets inside of me to severely piss of a metal detector, but I was not dying. “High... what does House want?”

“He has a jo-”

“I'll take it.” Serenity giggled softly, off to my side, and Flare nickered. The NCA ponies and High Stakes shared a number of confused looks before High Stakes opened his mouth. “I said.” I pre-interrupted. “I'd take it.”

I couldn't tell if High Stakes was suppressing a laugh or looking at me like I was an idiot. Maybe both. “Is she for real?” he asked nopony, and everypony. Flare nodded affirmative. “Right. Because this makes perfect sense.” He shook his head. “Fine. You're hired. First, we need to get to the Snake and travel up it.”

“Woah. A snake? Like a big one.” A huge mutated snake we had to travel up! Or maybe many small snakes and we had to travel up through its territory. Either way really cool.

“Hired...,” Serenity tugged on the barding that had probably saved my life, “the Snake is a river.”

Please don't laugh at me. Please don't laugh at me. I looked around and nopony laughed... well except for Flare but he hardly counted.

“Right.” I started walking. At least, I started walking after Serenity deftly replaced my leg's power supply. “Lead the way.”

“Hired Gun,” High Stakes smooth voice dances through the moon light illuminated darkness. “You should not stress yourself. You are-”

“Fuck that.” I looked up and smiled at Luna. The night was young and so was I, but neither would last forever, so there was no time for delay. “Let's go. To this river. I'll be fine.” The ponies all looked at me like I'd lost my mind. I had just fought five Steel Rangers in bloody stupid combat, and here I was leading the Celestia knows how long walk. Maybe I was crazy, but I was alive. I shouldn't have been, but there is something to be said for being a big, tough pony.

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Do you know what a river is?

See, that's a funny question. I had assumed I knew what a river was because I'd heard of them. Some sort of waterway, but it never really occurred to me how large they could be. Standing on the darkened banks of the river and looking forward I could not even see the other side, even with the riverboat's lights shining.

Apparently, a boat was a form of transportation you used on the river. It looked to me like a giant bulky house. It seemed to lay flat on the water, but I was assured there was a good portion sunken under the water. The main deck we climbed onto had a small area around the centre building for which to walk, as well as a sizable deck on the front, but the majority of the area was taken up by the building.

Looking up I could see it was two stories high, but given the small topmost building, it seemed the top was the boathouse. That is to say, the place where they steered the ship. Looking over the back half of the ship, I could see a long, large, tube-like wooden structure sticking out. It wasn't solid, but instead had wooden panels going from the rim into the centre. Or something, having never seen anything like that before I am really not sure if my explanation is appropriate or correct. Well, fuck it, I tried.

"The Snake is slow," the stallion said. He was a tiny orange pony with a long grey mane that almost touched the ground. Scrunching up his face as if my questioning his boat's sturdiness was an insult, he said, "Even with the rains. She won't tip. Mah colts treat her well, and missus cooks a fine meal. Best boat on the river what isn't full of pirates." He nodded firmly. "You in or...?"

"Five hundred caps..." I repeated the price slowly.

I turned to my companions.

The five NCA ponies had escorted us all the way to the Snake (thankfully only about four miles away) to dissuade Steel Rangers from pursuing. The green pony who worked for Mr. House was with us. And of course my two companions. A lovely travelling company if I hadn't of hurt so much. Even with all the healing potions they pumped into me, I still felt weak as a kitten, and my entire body ached in pain with each movement. At one point on the trail, I had needed a shot of Med-X just to continue.

Serenity blinked sleep out of her eyes and yawned loudly, though I could see she tried to hide it.

The NCA had given me the six thousand caps for killing Roy while we walked. They were very careful to give it to me when the light was the darkest, and no pony was around. "Yeah." I said to the boat pony. "Five hundred." Caps were exchanged, and fake smiles were given.

"Your names?" The pony asked pleasantly. "I am Red Sky."

"Hired Gun." I nodded, my head still pounding from the fight. I pointed to my companions. "Flare. Serenity. And..." That pony was coming with us... what was his name. I was sure he told me, but my mind was fuzzy and... "High Stakes." I said eventually.

"Welcome aboard. Don't shoot no pony." Now what would give him that impression... other than Subtlety hanging heavy on my back. "Two rooms upstairs, mares and stallions if you please, or whatever you want." Mares and stallions sounded about right. "You lot look tired, and I don't want any pony saying I kept the NCA waiting. We push off in the mornin'; we'll explain the rest then."

"Okay." I turned to Serenity, who was rubbing her eye with her hoof. "Okay, off to bed with you."

"But." Without a second's warning her eyes went big and round, verging on tears. "But I wanna stay up with you." Her lower lip quivered just enough to make my heart pang with guilt. "I'm not sleepy." On cosmic cue she started yawning. When her pout slid back into place, I felt the slight guilt she forced on me melt away. I gave her a stern look to bite back further protests. "Fine... but you promised we'd

talk..."

Crap.

"Flare, Stakes. Do whatever it is you do. Serenity is going to bed, I'll be down soon." Flare smirked and trotted around the boat to the front deck, and High Stakes followed for some reason. After nodding my thanks to the NCA ponies, I turned back to Serenity. "Okay. Talk, then bed." She nodded happily and I rolled my eyes. "March then." With a smirk she was off.

I hung back as she magicked the door to the main building open. After a brief stretch of my painful muscles, I followed after her. The inside of the boat was lit with candles through the main hall, all the way to the stairs, along them, and into our room. I was pleasantly surprised to find our room was lit too. The smoke from the candles filled the room, but it was a pleasant smell. Overall, it was nice, I suppose. Very clean, but with only two stiff-looking beds for comfort.

"Serenity." I started to say, but I was cut off.

"Why can't you be my momma?!" she said, almost as soon as I shut the door.

"Because. I'm not."

"So?" She sat on the floor looking stubbornly at me. "I rescued you, you owe me." She did at that, but that was a big request. I don't think she truly understood how big.

"You did good." Still, I shook my head. "But you don't want me as a mother."

"I'm pretty sure I do."

"Listen, Serenity." I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible. The subject of motherhood made my already fucked-up body twist in agony. It was just... a bad idea for so many reasons. "I'm a bad pony... okay. For Celestia's sake, I almost sold you when we met."

"No," she squeaked, staring solemnly at the floor under her hood. "Y-you listen... I... you don't understand, Hire... you. I-I was in The Watchers all my life, it was dull and boring and all, nopony cared for me, not really. They gave me food and shelter, and teachings, but nopony there cared. Even still, I just wanted to help ponies, then one day, for the first time, they let me go on a caravan! I was gonna help ponies!" I sat on the bed and watched the filly. She spoke with such emotion, I could almost feel it myself. "B-but they came... the slavers." She sniffled. "Ponies died around me... me and the other foals couldn't do anything. You... you're always so big and strong... I wish I was... all I could do was cry and wet myself as they tied us up and made us walk. We walked for days and days until my hooves were bloody... I was strong. I was, really. I helped the other foals... when we stopped I treated their injuries... One night, when I thought I was going to die of exhaustion, there were gun shots..."

"I thought we were saved... I was so happy." She shook tears out of her eyes. "Watchers came back... they found us, I thought. Only... it was just her." She made the word her own personal curse. I had no idea she could be so venomous. "She locked us up, too. All of us in her store... I could hear voices and I screamed and cried until I ran out of tears, but they never heard. The ponies upstairs ignored us. Eventually all of the foals were sold... but me. I was next... last... I... had given up hope. Nothing mattered. When you came down and rescued me I knew you were just another slaver... I..."

"I was right..."

"It didn't matter, I could have ran, but what was the point? So I followed... I followed you to Silver Bullet and did what you said. I knew my fate..." She scrunched up her muzzle. "Then... he said where he was gonna sell me too. Your face, it was... like a mix of rage and hate and pity, and you shot him. You were outnumbered four to one and you shot him! For me!" Her eyes went wide at the thought, hardly believing it herself. "You... you saved me. For no reason... I didn't understand. Then you went to

the stable, and I got my stupid foal head all drowned... and you saved me again...

“You're the only pony who ever did that. You... you saved me against stupidly impossible odds.” She let her hood fall back, and to my shock, she was crying. “You saved me. You... you care. You're the best momma cause you care... you care about me.” What the hell happened to this filly? Had she had such a shitty life that anypony showing her an iota of kindness was a thing of beauty to be cherished forever.

I wrapped my hooves around her and let her cry. What was I to say? How could I tell her no after that? She needed somepony to care for her, care about her, to tell her she did good, to punish her when she misbehaved. But how could it be me? I couldn't take on that responsibility again. I was a stupid pony, prone to running into impossible situations and getting fucked up. I could barely keep myself alive and hale. How could I be expected to help a filly too? I couldn't. I was a failure in everything I did. How could I drag her down with me?

Looking down at her tiny body sobbing tears into my chest, I realized I couldn't say no.

My whole body was sore. Pain lanced through me at each small movement, and my head was hit with a sudden blinding pain.

I couldn't tell her no. But I couldn't tell myself yes.

Eventually, Serenity stopped crying and used my coat to dry her tears. Slowly and timidly she looked up at me. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her mane was a frizzled mess, but she smiled ever so lightly. “I...” I tried to speak but no words came out. What was I supposed to choose?! If I told her no, I would break her heart, and I couldn't bear to see her cry again. If I told her no, I would fail her like I had failed every other pony I tried to protect.

Fuck.

“I...” Life is not simple. I tried so hard to treat life like a fight. If you *survive*, you win, but in this case... sometimes life gives you a choice and both answers are wrong. How are you supposed to work with that? I am not a clever pony, I can't deal with vagueness. I can't do responsibility. I was not a good pony, I was not a smart pony, I was not a... not a mother. My mind was swimming, but I had no idea. What was I supposed to do? Give her disappointment now, or later?

I wanted to cry, drink, and kick something. But none of those things held my answer.

“I need to think about it.”

That saddened her, I could see. How could it not? I brushed her mane back with my hoof and sighed a bit. “It's a big thing... I need to think. Please.” Reluctantly she nodded.

“You'd make the best momma.”

No, that I would not.

“Maybe.” I lied through my teeth. Then I patted her on the back. “Now go to bed.” Her pout was ineffective as I pointed her toward the bed.

With a grumble and a yawn she jumped onto the bed. Tucking her in, she continued to be grumpy, but I knew as soon as I blew the candles out, she'd be asleep. “G'night,” I said softly.

“Night, mommy.”

The lights were blown out, and I walked down the stairs and into the night.

The wind was chill and crisp and smelled of water and life. On the front deck I could see High Stakes and Flare chatting. I trusted Mr. House's employee little to none, but as long as he kept Flare occupied I was happy. I walked the other way, to the rear of the ship, and sat looking up at the sky.

The vague shape of Luna was half hidden behind the ever shifting clouds. They hadn't gone away fully, but there were less, and most moved and shifted as if blown away. Celestia and Luna had returned, but life still wasn't rainbows and sunshine. Life was even more confusing than it had been, but there in the sky there was still hope. There was nothing I could say to Serenity without breaking her heart eventually, and there was nothing I could do to stop the wasteland from trying to tear me down.

But that's life right? Problems came and went, and even as they got resolved, more show up to take their place. There was time to change, to fight back, to *survive*. Luna came out from the cloud layer, her light shining down on me and fluttering over the still river water. Things weren't so bad. I had a leg to stand on, friends of a sort, a filly who looked up to me... and a job on the horizon.

It was time to move forward, and I would do it with the sun on my back.

That's not so bad, is it?

Level Up!

New Perk: Intense Training Level 2: Actually paying attention to your surroundings and companions has finally paid off. +1 to Perception.

Skill Note: Sneak 50

((A/N: Once again I need to give my thanks to Kkat for creating this world and doing those awesome things she does. As well a s big thanks to theBSdude [without whom I'd be dwindling in obscurity] Julep, and ErrantIndy. All three help make this thing here readable, so give them your praise.))

## *Chapter 12: Innocence*

*"All things truly wicked start from an innocence."*

“Can't catch me, can't catch me!”

I squealed and ran as fast as my stubby little legs could carry me. Meadow had always been uncomfortable around heights, so I sped up the ramp onto the third platform before climbing on top of Three-Legged Forest Fire's house. It was the highest spot in Marefort, and I knew my brother wouldn't have the stomach to reach me. Standing on top of the rickety metal shack, I could see the whole complex. I didn't understand just how strange a place it was then, boxes stacked on boxes shoved inside an old warehouse like a maze. Buildings rose and fell, bridges spanned gaps, and stairs led to higher platforms, all under a roof that was old enough to have plenty of holes for natural light. Well, as much light as you got in the wasteland.

“Get down here!” my brother screeched in his high-pitched voice. He was a year older than me, but I was taller and thicker. Everypony said I was going to grow up to be a big mare. Still, Meadow was in charge because he had his cutie mark, and I didn't. It was a red rose, and he was supposed to be a stallion! How silly is that. When I got mine, I planned to have something cool like a silver bullet streaming fire, or a big stick for fighting off bad-ponies.

I stuck my tongue out at him. “Noooo. You smell.”

I could practically hear him grinding his teeth together in annoyance. Music to my ears. “I said get do-”  
Flying Silver Storm tackle!

I landed on him with a thunk and we both went tumbling across the floor. Giggling, I let him get on top of me and pin my forelegs down, my head dangling just over the thirty foot drop to the Marefort floor. He was older and had his cutie mark, so even though I was bigger, I had to let him win. It was a rule. I could have beaten him though. I could have beaten anypony.

“There, now stay put. Marigold-”

“Is a butt.” I finished with a grin. He snarled and lowered his head so we were nearly at eye level. Marigold was a butt though. Her mother was the scavenging supervisor and apparently that meant she got to make all the rules, it didn't help that she was nearly a grown mare in her own right... still a butt.

“Silver Storm I-” I licked his cheek. He tasted like grease, so I spat as he jumped back and recoiled in disgust at my sudden display of affection. Well, it was more of a sudden display of something I knew bugged him. “Yuck,” he said, far enough away now I could scramble to my feet. I puffed my chest out, and stood up tall so he could see how much shorter he was than me. “Stop that, you look stupid.”

“Your face is stupid.”

Rolling his deep brown eyes, he said, “Stop being a brat. We have work.” Work was dumb. I didn't even have my cutie mark yet, and they were already giving me extra work! Just because everypony else my age had their cutie mark didn't mean I should have to help them, too. Momma said it was because someponies thought I didn't have mine because I was stupid, but I wasn't stupid. Besides, cutie marks are dumb and have a dumb name. I never even wanted one.

“Naah.” He just shook his long purple mane at me.

“Meadow's right.” A red filly trotted over from Three-Legged Forest Fire's house, a scowl plastered on her stupid red face. “You have work, an' you woke up my father.” She was the tiniest filly I'd ever seen, and the reddest. Her name used to be Cakewalk, but after she got that tattoo of a fire on her butt she made everyone call her Wildfire. I just called her a bitch... only I called her that when Momma wasn't watching.

“Your father is always sleeping.” Even Meadow found her insufferable. That's what he told me anyway, but sometimes when he thought I wasn't looking, I caught him staring at her cutie mark. “Besides. Marigold wants you to come along too. Says we're finally going to dig into the west building, and we need all the help.” Really! See, that was actually exciting. That thing had been a crumpled heap forever, and there had to be a lot of goodies there. They had other things to scavenge from before so they never needed to risk digging in that rubble, but apparently things had changed.

“What?!” She looked shocked, and it was sweet. Stupid Cakewalk, I mean Wildfire. “I need to take care of pa-”

“Ain't he sleepin'?” He was always sleeping. Three-Legged Forest Fire had lost his leg a long time ago, and was sickly ever since. Lately though he had been getting worse, rarely leaving his house at all.

“What do you know, you're a blockhead.” She stated plainly, “And a stupid blank flank. Aren't you supposed to be ol-”

“Wildfire.” My brother spun and glared at her like only he could. He was nice most of the sometimes, but every once in a while he just got so angry. “Shut up. We're going, and you're going to stop picking on my sister.” He didn't have to stick up for me like that, but as Cakewalk, I mean Wildfire, backed off I couldn't have been happier.

“Okay, bye!” I said with a grin.

I hopped off the edge of the third platform. Grabbing the ledge with my fore legs, I kicked my other legs idly in the air trying to get myself to swing. Meadow screamed something his brown eyes wide, but I ignore him as I got my swing on. Once. Twice. And go!

Letting go mid swing I flew forward under the third platform right into Nos' window, over her bed, and rolled onto the ground. The 'house' was a single room with a bed on one end, and a table on the other. Oh! And there was a door there too. I bolted out it and skidded to a stop so I could turn. I sped over one of the rickety rope bridges that lashed the two halves of Marefort together. Stopping midway I did something Momma always told me not to. I jumped.

Squealing, I fell twenty feet and landed with a bounce on a pile of sodden mattresses left beside June Bug's cleaning shop thingy. They had been there for a week, but she hadn't gotten to them. They made an awesome landing pad though. Giggling and rolling off the pile, I shook the dirt out of my mane. I was sure June Bug was scolding me, but I didn't listen. Looking up I could see Meadow and Wildfire on the second platform, still making their way down. Maybe I wasn't a super genius pony or nothing, but I did know Marefort better than anypony else. It was a maze, and I, the maze master.

“CATCH ME IF YOU CAN!” I shouted my challenge up to them, but I doubt they heard. Marefort was always loud.

I burst through the ever-open doors of Marefort with a grin on my face. The day was wet, a slight drizzle falling from the sky. Celestia's Tears, my momma called it. All around I could see buckets set up to collect the water for drinking. It was healthier than ground water, Momma told me, but I always thought it tasted gross.

“Get back here, Silver!” Crap! Looking back I could see them exiting Marefort. How had they

managed to catch up?! They must have used my super secret jumping technique. Actually, considering Cakewalk's frazzled red mane and slightly paler red face, I was going to guess that is what happened. They were trickier than I had thought.

So I ran as fast as my stubby little legs could carry me. As I neared the ruined remains of the western buildings I could see so many ponies working in and around it. Building, lifting, removing. Looking for stuff to sell, or something. I zoomed past Marigold, her gold and orange mane blowing in her face from my speed.

I skidded to the stop in front of the rubble and suddenly ducked. Meadow had caught up so much he couldn't stop! He tripped over my curled up body and flew into the rubble with a puff of dirt.

I giggled as Wildfire trotted up to me, and gave me a dirty look. "Aren't you going to help him?"

I raised an eyebrow at Cakewalk, just as the silver-grey body of Meadow popped out of the rubble. "Yeah...." I said slowly. "FLYING SILVER STORM TACKLE!"

I flew like the wind smashing into him and sending both of us tumbling into rubble and remains. I dimly heard Wildfire say how dangerous that was, but I ignored her because it was also fun! In my mind, fun was far more important than things like danger or dangerous stuff.

The furious battle of wits and tiny hooves only ended when I conked my head hard against a wooden box. Meadow backed off and let me study the offending object. It was big and sturdy, and had words written on it, but I couldn't really read... oh well. With a kick, the lid of the box slid off.

What I saw was....

It was amazing. Rows and rows of bullets that seemed to glow. If I tilted my head, their colour shifted and faded from blue to purple, and back to blue again. I didn't know what they were, but I did know that they were something impressive. Behind me, Meadow pushed and squirmed past trying to get a look all for himself.

"What is this?" I turned to the unfamiliar voice, and that was odd as I knew every pony in Marefort. Meadow jumped in front of me to shield me, but I could see over his head. He was a tall olive pony with a long, flowing grey mane, wet from the rain. "Do not be afraid, my little ponies. My name is Smooth Tongue." He politely waved a hoof at the box we were protecting. "Please, show me what you found."

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My shoulder became pain, fire lanced through it and up my chest burning and stinging. Dimly, I heard muffled sobs. Serenity.

My eyes shot open.

In the darkness of my room, I saw a a figure over me. Hooves on my bed. No. One was on my bed, the other pressing against my shoulder. The earth pony sneered and gave the hoof on my shoulder a twist. Pain blinded me. I may have screamed.

With a kick, the pony fell off me, the blade sliding from my shoulder. It stung like a bitch, and blood started soaking down my body and wetting my mattress. No time to think though, I rolled off the bed and looked across the room. Serenity was crying in her sleep. My assailant regarded me with a grin and tried to circle. Was he aware he was standing between me and my Serenity?

In the gloom, I could not see his colour or cutie-mark, but I could see he was an earth pony and on his leg was a strange pipbuck-like device. He moved to kick at me with his hoof, a long skinny blade sticking out of his leg-device. I'd seen one before.

Still sluggish from sleep, the blade grazed my cheek just enough to bleed. He kicked again, so I ducked and weaved back out of the way. Fucker was quicker than he should have been, waving the blade in front of him like a crazy pony. Grah, this was irritating. In a desperate lunge, he charged towards me.

I brought up my metal leg. The blade clattered and got stuck in a hole. I thought I could hear wires slicing, but it didn't matter, for with a twist his blade snapped off. The look of horror on his face was glorious. Did he really think a single stab would take me down when Serenity was crying? The fool flew through the air at the power of my buck. His head smashed through the door when he hit it, before his body slid to the floor. Normally, I would have made extra sure the assassin was extra dead, but Serenity!

Running over, I scooped her up in my forearms, just in time for her to wake up. "You're okay," I whispered, my mind drowsy from sleep and rushing from the fight. "You're okay."

"I...", she looked up to me, her grey eyes full of sleep and tears, "you're... I thought. That ghou... he was choking you again and I..."

"Just a dream," I whispered. I let her dry her eyes in my chest. "Just a nightmare. I'm still here." My heart tightened and I mentally kicked myself. What possessed me to bring her into those Celestia-forsaken tunnels in the first place? If I had only known, if we had only known.

*I never wanted this, for either of us.*

The words in my head chilled me to the bone and numbed the pain in my shoulder. Shaking my head, I ignored the words; they were just my imagination. Just the shadow of my history come back to haunt me.

"Hired..." I nodded still trying to comfort her. "You're bleedin."

She looked up at me, the right side of her muzzle was caked in blood. My whole chest had been dyed red, and my shoulder kept going. I blinked, and my head started to feel fuzzy. Blood loss. Again. Fuck. "I'm fine." I lied. The night before, I had nearly got myself killed by Steel Rangers, and now I felt the need to lose more blood.

Serenity didn't seem to believe me.

"What the hell?!" Flare burst through my broken door, his green and yellow mane frazzled. His pink eyes went wide, looking at me, my blood, then down to the unconscious assassin. "Kinky, but keep it down! Some ponies are trying to sleep off a night of rescuing your flank..."

Another pony entered behind Flare. I didn't realize it the night before, but that pony... what was his name... High Stakes. The unicorn that worked for Mr. House, he was much taller than I thought; almost to height with me, but much skinnier than I. I wasn't sure how to feel about that. "What is this commotion?" He raised a dainty eyebrow. "It seems you are injured, Miss Gun."

"No shit." I muttered. Serenity giggled, squirming away from me so she could find something to clean off her blood-stained face.

"After your recent activities, might I suggest taking a few days of rest? It'll be two days ride up the Snake, and you will need to conserve your strength."

"No. I'm good." I groaned, crawling off Serenity's bed onto my hooves, only for my foreleg to collapse sending me to a knee.

"Rest," Flare agreed, smoothing back his mane. "Lots of it. Looks like you just finished wrestling a hellhound. Don't worry about Mr. Stabby Stabberson." he kicked the assassin. "We'll feed him to the fishes or... whatever it is you do on a boat, no worries."

“But.” No, rest was bad. Gotta keep in shape for whatever tried to kill me next. Probably a hellhound, then a dragon, in that order. “Shouldn't w-” I winced as a stab of pain went through my body from one of my many injuries. “We. Find out... who he's working for.”

“The Baises no doubt. Mr. House has given me a full dossier on you and known alliances. Molly has been known to employ earth pony assassins with similar gadgets.” The pip-knife thing. I remember one ambushed me a while before. “I imagine she could have tracked your PipBuck, if she has one in her possession.” Was that a thing? “ We should continue another time, I think; you are injured and need rest.”

The room seemed to grow darker as Flare nodded. Desperately I turned to Serenity to support, but she already had a healing potion in her mouth and nodded happily. “Momma's day off.”

Maybe I didn't want a day off!

---

Maybe I didn't have control over my life. Somehow, I found myself lying in bed and drinking down healing potions like no tomorrow. Serenity claimed they were only ever a quick fix, and would never fix me permanently but still forced me to drink more than I would have liked. It's not like we wanted for money now, and Captain Red Sky seemed to have plenty of the potions stocked and eager to sell, but still.

Groaning, I rolled onto my stomach and flicked on my PipBuck's radio. As the fuzzy static faded to music, I took a look around our cabin. The blood had been mostly cleaned by High Stakes' special unicorn magic or something, and all evidence of the fight had been cleaned away. I wasn't really sure what happened to the assassin, and I knew enough not to ask. Most likely, he was thrown overboard or killed outright.

I still couldn't figure out how he got into my room! Even if Molly had a pipbuck, how would she know how to track mine? Even if she could, how did her assassin get to me so fast? According to High Stakes, the boat was already swimming upriver by the time the assassin woke me up (about noon. Don't judge me. I fought five steel rangers the day before. I deserved an extra long sleep. ), so he must have found me at night. Argh, it hurt my head!

I buried my face in the pillow just as Mr. New Haygas' voice came soaring over the radio, sounding like a silk god.

*“Good Afternoon, Dise. And how are we today? The Sun is still shining, so I am feeling mighty fine. It's time for the news. In a show of goodwill towards the NCA and to show they plan on holding onto their side of the non-aggression pact, the Minotaurs have removed a quarter of their forces from the Canyon Ridge Bridge. However, there are still whispers of shady dealings between the Mustangs and Minotaurs, even after Roy's assassination a few days ago. In light of said battle, the new leader of the Mustangs, Mayhem, has denied all claims of involvement, but stated that he is seeking additional revenue options to secure the safety and security of The Moon, as well as to make sure his water supply reaches all the thirsty mouths of the city. To that end, he has cut water taxes on all citizens of Dise, but raised its price to all major factions within Dise, including: Mr. House and the Hizai, The Baises, The Galicians, The Watchers, The Remnants, Cerberus Co., The Finishers, The NCA, and the newly formed Red Racer Construction Company. Mayhem claims this will allow his water to get to the ponies that need it most, while still giving him the extra caps needed to repair after the Baises' unprovoked attack.*

*“In strangely unrelated news, two NCA officials are under questioning after a unusual incident last night. According to lieutenant Dusty Breeze, three ponies approached the Parasite Mound check point near midnight, and asked for admittance into Dise to set up a school. She says they were alicorns from*

*Equestria, and so she opened fire, causing them to flee. This despite the fact an Alicorn has never been observed past Equestrian borders. The current NCA line is that the two NCA officers who saw the alleged alicorns were weary from a twelve hour shift, fell asleep on the job, and dreamt the alicorns up. This does not, however, explain how two ponies can have the same dream at once. Well, that's NCA logic for you.*

*“Finally. A few days ago we gave you word of a mother/daughter team who wiped out a raider base in the north east that has been plaguing caravans for months. Well today I heard the duo found themselves at the small village of Wending, just as a Radscorpion swarm stormed through. What else could they do but kill every one of those buggers and save the whole town! The townsfolk of Wending are calling them heroes, and I guess I am inclined to agree.”*

“You really listen to that?” A voice snapped me out of my Haygas-induced haze. I turned my head to see a pale green unicorn enter. His long red mane was shockingly straight as it fell from his head, covering up half of his face. I had to figure having strands of hair scraping against glasses couldn't be good for them, but what did I know? Fashion was never my forte. “And here I was thinking all ponies knew not to trust the news.” A bit of an arrogant stallion, wasn't he? When he trotted over and laid beside my bed I got a good look at his cutie mark: a pair of dice, both showing the 'one' side up.

“Whatever.” I clicked the pipbuck off, quietly annoyed I'd have to listen to High Stakes instead of New Haygas. Have I ever said I love that radio stallion's voice? “This job. What is it?” I couldn't tell if he was snorting or chuckling.

“I thought you'd never ask.” His teeth were so perfect and white when he smiled, it made me want to smash them. “Mr. House has been watching you for some time.” I've always wanted a stalker. “He's looking to hire you in a more... permanent position.” You mean he's not going to chain me up and force me to do a dirty job for him? (get your mind out of the gutter) Wow, he's far brighter than every other gang leader I'd met. “But first, a test.”

“A test...?”

“Yes, you know, I throw you into an ambiguous environment, tell you to do something, and silently judge you.” That sounded so stupid. I face planted into my pillow. So soft and fluffy. “For this we need to travel to the eastern mountains. Have you heard of a group that calls themselves Celestia's Vision?” I nodded dumbly, still hiding in my pillow fort. “They have for some reason, known only to themselves, travelled up to the town of Karkhoof. Apparently it has been reformed as a Zebra haven in Caledonia, and well.” He smirked a bit. “Celestia's Vision hate all things ‘unnatural’. To them, that includes griffins, alicorns, donkeys, mules, minotaurs, hell hounds, buffalo, cyborgs, pegasi, and especially zebras. It doesn't help that much of Dise shares most of their sentiments. So they marched their way up there, fixing to start trouble, but for now they're just blockading the trade route and protesting.”

“So?”

“You are to stop it.” How helpful.

“Stop what?”

“Whatever you wish. Getting up there will be the hard part, what with the eels, but House wants the situation dealt with and has left you to decide how and in what way.” I raised an eyebrow at him just to make sure he was serious. The spark in his deep green eyes told me he was. Apparently, this Mr. House had been watching me closely but hadn't yet realized I was stupid. I had charged five Steel Rangers by myself yesterday, and he wants me to resolve an ambiguous situation. For fuck's sake, I was going to end up killing some innocent pony, I could feel it.

“House....” I remembered something. It was a fuzzy bit in the back of my memory, but I remembered it. “He does cybernetics right? And hires them mostly.” Stakes nodded. “So...” I studied High Stakes over and tried my very best to be witty. “You are a mercenary not a full time employee of Mr. House... and he wants me to side with the Zebras.”

“Yes... and no. It is true I am not always in the pocketbook of Mr. House, though this could change, but there is no indication I got from him he cares what side you choose. Celestia's Vision has protested his hotel before, he never really cared. They are a thing to be ignored. What he wants is to see what you choose.” Really? Whatever, it was clearly him wanting me to pick the side that didn't hate him, and see if I was smart enough to figure it out. “It's a tough choice. Ponies that hate you or zebras.”

“Zebras,” I said lifting my head from my pillows. Why was my ear throbbing? Ears shouldn't do that.

He looked... shocked maybe. I wasn't sure, but not as confident as he had before. “Zebras... but they are....” His face twisted in disgust.

“Zebras.” I failed to see the issue. Far as I knew, the difference between a zebra and a pony was small. Why should it matter?

“Err... zebras. May I ask why?” he asked, carefully adjusting his glasses with a green glow. His magic burned into my shoulder, but I was in so much pain I could hardly feel it at all. The sensation was still there though, as clear as day, like all magic. The more often I felt that burn, the more I could feel the difference between ponies. I am not sure how to explain the slight difference in sensation, but I could tell it, somehow.

“Well... Celestia's Vision hates me. Zebras don't. Be easier to land a contract.”

He stared at me blankly. “You're an... interesting pony.”

“LUNCH TIME!”

That burst of excitement could only have come from one pony. Serenity came flying through the door (without knocking), with a bowl of soup floating in a pink glow before her. “Move, Mister Stakes,” she said with a grin, trotting over to my bedside. “Sick Momma needs her soup.” The stallion chuckled heartily and deftly removed himself from my bedside. He did not leave completely though, preferring to watch us from the corner of our room. That creeper.

“Serenity, I'm not si--.” The soup was spicy and tasted of carrots when the spoon was shoved in my mouth. I grumbled around the spoon as she pulled it free from my lips, “Serenity, that's not fun--” Another spoonful of the thin soup. Apparently, words weren't going to do the trick. So when she tried to pull the spoon out again I clamped down hard on it. After a brief struggled she gave up, and I bit the head of the spoon off.

Letting the handle fall onto the floor and spitting the head down with it, I said, “Serenity. Stop that. I am not sick.”

“You broke my spoon.” She pouted down at the snapped utensil... right before floating another one out of her saddle bag. “Good thing I brought an extra!” Oh, you have got to be kidding me! Before she could even try again, I ripped the bowl from her magical grip with my teeth, tilted my head back, and gulped it down. Letting the container dropped to the floor, I gave the pouting Serenity a blank look.

“Really, Serenity?”

“What?” She rolled her eyes at me. “I was just trying ta help. You were sick--” Not sick. I hadn't been sick for months. Sure, it felt like me and a dragon got into a boxing match, but I wasn't ill. Only sore. I disliked the idea of being sick on a whole. Something about being sickly and weak from something other than being shot or stabbed didn't sit well with me.

"I'm not sick," I interrupted. High Stakes chuckled off to the side. He was quickly getting on my nerves. "I just need rest... apparently. Steel Rangers. Their armour is tough." To kick. The bottoms of my hooves still ached. "I can feed myself."

"Fine, I just wanted to do something . Streamwind wouldn't let me help with the soup either...." Who? "She's the Captain's wife she is she-"

BOOM

Suddenly, I was rolling across the room as the boat swayed and rocked.

BOOM

Stumbling, I was shaken to my knees by the second blast. Pain throbbed through my back, and I grunted as I got back to my hooves.

BOOM

I managed to keep my balance and searched around the room. High Stakes had vanished completely, and Serenity was rolling across the floor towards me. After catching her with a hoof, I helped her onto my back. "Serenity, get Subtlety." My gun was lying across the room, so I walked towards it slowly as a pink glow engulfed it.

BOOM

The pink glow faded with a squeak. The gun and saddle started glowing again, and started to unsteadily float towards me. I stepped under it, and felt the weight drop against my back. It was heavy, but I was basically a tank in pony skin, so it wasn't anything I couldn't handle. Together, me and Serenity managed to get it strapped onto my back.

BOOM

Oh, for fuck's sake. My shoulder slammed into the door frame cracking it and sending, yes, even more pain lacing through my leg. Not wasting anymore time, I stormed down the stairs and into the bright daylight.

It was... kind of scary. I'd been bed-ridden since the night before and hadn't seen the boat on the water. The river seemed so wide, and the far shore seemed so small. Peering over the railing, I saw a thick, clear blueness. The light shining down made it sparkle, as a two headed fish looked up through the water at me... actually that was gross.

BOOM

Ack! I found myself half hanging off the ship my forelegs kicking wildly, while Serenity took the opportunity to jump off my back onto the deck. As tempting as that water was, I had a sinking feeling it'd be like swimming in radioactive waste.

"Hey." With a flurry of blue feathers, I was staring nose to nose at Flare as he hovered just inches from the sickly water. "I wouldn't swim in that if I were you. Had a friend who swam in the river and one of her wings fell right off! You don't have any wings but I can't imagine it'd be healthy." Oh fuck off, Flare. With a tug he lifted me back onto solid-ish ground. "I think we're being attacked or something; you should see to... wait shouldn't you be in bed?"

Seriously, fuck off.

I limped around the side of the boat onto the spacious front deck. Across from us, floating low in the river, was a long, skinny boat with a strange tree-like structure in the centre. The pole shot up into the air with a huge cloth sheet hanging from it. Confusion must have been clear on my face as Serenity

explained. "It's a sailing boat." Oh! I knew that. I just forgot for a minute. It happens. Don't judge me.

On the deck of the other ship stood five of the filthiest ponies I'd ever seen, including myself, standing around a huge black gun. Wait. I knew that, too. It wasn't a gun it was a... cannon. Like the party cannon from The Clips and Clops... only shooting death instead of parties.

"You scurvy river rats!" Captain Red Sky yelled across the gap. The pirate ponies chuckled among themselves, and I trotted up beside Sky. He gave me the slightest of nods when he saw my weapon before turning his attention back to the pirates. "Y'all leave my ship alone, I'll tell you what!"

"Yeah!" one replied with a grin. "When you give us all your goods, we will!"

"Dear." What, who? I turned my head to see a small black unicorn mare with an almost obscenely bright pink mane. "You might want these." In her magic was a magazine of .50 Calibre rounds. Each of the bullets had a bright blue tip. I nodded dumbly at her as I realized I'd already used all my ammo fighting the Steel Rangers.

"Please." The mare who, I assumed to be Streamwind, the captain's wife, turned to my battle saddle and got to work. She gave me a lovely view of her flank in the progress... I mean cutie mark! I was not checking out a married mare, as I didn't like mares and....

Does anypony even believe that anymore?

I meant to say I was looking at her cutie-mark, which was a green bullet surrounded by a magical pink glow. It was kind of badass-looking actually, the sort of thing I wanted as a filly (instead I got three rocks). After she was done, the small mare (Actually she may not have been that small. Normal sized mares tended to look like fillies compared to me) nodded at me, and I turned back to the pirates.

"Last chance, mate!" the pirate screamed across the water. "Next shot is going through your pretty fa--"

BANG

The bullet sprang from Subtlety with a streak of red careening into the mast of the pirate ship. There was a slight spark on the wooden post and then a subtle whoosh. The mast was on fire, and the fire was spreading.

I just got bullets. That. Shot. Fire.

Mwahahaha.

Subtlety sent blasts of fire out again and again. The second shot slashed through the sail, setting it ablaze faster than I could blink, the third struck the side of the ship, cracking wood and igniting something inside. Before long the ship was engulfed and casting a bright orange glow across the river. I could barely hear the screams of burning pirates over the sound of my own glee. My gun shot fire!  
FIRE!

I turned to grin at my companions who mostly stood watching with pale faces. Flare faced-hoofed, High Stakes shrugged, and Serenity looked as if she was going to be sick. Sick...

Suddenly, the boat rocked under my feat making me unsteady. I felt my stomach heave at the sensation and felt strangely nauseous. Dimly, I heard the sound of another cannon ball, but I certainly felt the wave shake the boat sending my lunch into my throat.

As fast as my hooves could manage, I ran to the side of the boat. The soup tasted a lot worse coming up than it did going in, but thankfully I didn't get any of it on the deck. Leaning over the railing, my face a bit green, I heard Serenity's voice.

"I knew Momma was sick!"

---

The next few days went along swimmingly, if you'll pardon the pun. I do so love puns. Serenity insisted on acting as if I was deathly ill for the first day or so, even though she knew I wasn't. I'd suspected it was because she was bored. I mean, since we had got into Dise, she'd always had something to do, but on the ship, she couldn't even walk or look around to alleviate her boredom. I mentioned this to Streamwind, and she did something I never would have thought of.

She gave the filly a toy.

Who would have thought! I mean, I never had toys when I was a foal, and she seemed so mature sometimes I never thought of it. The toy in question was a small orange pegasus doll with a soft and brush-able lavender mane. Serenity had taken it a bit warily at first, but soon was brushing its hair, giggling all the way, and even named the doll Scootaloo. It distracted her enough for me to sneak out and take a nap on the deck. What? The room was stuffy, and I liked the rest.

When I had returned to that night she had smashed off one of the pegasus filly's wings, and cut off the left back leg, and replaced them both with cyborg parts from the stuff she scavenged from the Steel Ranger base. When she saw me staring blankly at what she had done she enthusiastically informed me that she was 'cooler this way' and called her, 'Scootaborg.'. I wasn't sure if it was creepy or adorable, so I kept my mouth shut and let her do what she wanted.

This was basically my life for two days. It was far better than being chased by ghouls, going crazy, or fighting Steel Rangers, so I was perfectly content. Flare seemed to be absent a lot though, but I figured he was off scouting for us so we'd know if other pirates were nearby. Mr. House's agent wasn't around much either, but I didn't care. He bothered me in ways I couldn't begin to describe.

"So." We were nearing the end of our fun boating adventure, and I had taken the time to find Streamwind in the boat house. It was a good view from there; with windows on every wall, you got a 360 view of the river. The rocking of the boat ceased to bother me as much as it did before, but honestly that was more the waves caused by the cannon shaking the ship. "How much for all your fire bullets?"

"Now dear," She said with a sweet smile, "They're called incendiary rounds."

"Right those in... incenary rounds."

"Incendiary." Serenity corrected, resting Scootaborg on the top of my head and peeking up over it. "Zebras useda' make'em with their magics. They set stuff on fire... but I thought only zebras made'em?"

"True enough, little miss." She smiled at the filly on my head. "But, then again, most ponies don't have ammo modifying as their special talent. So I get to break all the rules."

"When I get my cutie-mark, can I break rules?"

"No," I added quickly before she got any ideas. "So how much?"

"500 caps. They're hard to make, but I have 75. Considering you won't find them anywhere else, I suggest you take it." I nodded dumbly at her. It seemed like a good deal. "Uh... wait, really? Dear, you ain't too bright are you." I shook my head, no use denying it. A change of caps later and I had my fire ammo. Fire ammo!

Serenity giggled at my glee, as I turned to the door. I never did have the chance to leave, though. Suddenly Flare was there, floating up the stairs while smoothing his hair back, with High Stakes coming up behind him.

"Are we there yet? This boat is sooooo boring, I tell you. I mean it's like... I dunno." He flipped upside

down to look me in the eyes. “You feelin' any better? I mean you have been getting stabbed and shot a lot recently. If it hadn't of been for your barding, you would've been a Swiss cheese pony.” A... what? “You look better.”

“Sore.” I said simply. “But better.”

“Good, go-oh!” He flapped his wings and leaned forward to stare at Serenity's doll on my head. “Who's that?”

“Scootaborg!” Serenity lifted the strange toy up. “She was a child during the Red War,” Red War... now I know I have heard that term before, “and lost her hoof and wing when Hoof Town fell. She was found by a wandering stranger and nursed to health. After getting her Cyber parts, she decided to travel the wasteland looking for revenge and also her special talent.” That was a pretty extensive backstory.

Flare just smiled amiably and nodded during the story. “I see. I am going to guess you made the... uh... accessories yourself?”

“Sure did!” I could practically hear her smile. “They don't work though. Too small, and I'm not that good yet. I can like, fix'em, but making from scratch is difficult you know?”

“Yeah, know all bout that shit,” He smirked before floating over to Red Sky. The Captain seemed to ignore the Pegasus, as he carefully fiddled with the ships steering wheel. Either that or he was annoyed that his cabin had suddenly become crowded.

“Where have you been?” I questioned Mr. House's pet unicorn. As a rule, I distrust anypony working for a gang, especially if said pony was my employer. I had been having really shitty luck with jobs, so it was healthy to assume I was going to be stabbed in the back. In fact, the only jobs that had gone the way I'd wanted were the ones back in Timber. I really hoped I hadn't jinxed anything by thinking that.

“Reading.” I made my 'ewww, what' face at him much to his amusement. “Books are a rare thing in the wasteland, and getting rarer. I treasure the ones I can find that are complete. Lately, I have been reading a manual on obscure Zebra magical fetishes.” Magical... wait what. Actually never mind, I really didn't want to know. “It is very interesting, and I thought appropriate as for our current mission, wouldn't you agree?” Yeah, sure. Whatever.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

“What did you think I was doing, may I ask?” He smirked at me, and I could have sworn his glasses sparkled in the sunlight.

“Uh.” I blinked at him and turned away to the main window. “No clue. Why I asked.”

“She thought you were spying and doin' secret things.” Serenity said half hardheartedly from my back. Sometimes that filly needed to learn when to not speak. I turned my head around to give the stallion a weak smile. By the stern gaze he cast upon me, I got the feeling he trusted me less than I trusted him.

“There it is.” Thank you, Captain Convenient Distraction! Red Sky pointed off in the distance, so I trotted over to his side to see. Not too far away, near a bend in the river, was a expansive dock and what looked like a little town. Maybe fifteen buildings hugged the river bank, surrounded by chain-link fence. Atop the tallest building (a skinny, four-story building) waved the NCA flag: a five legged pony on a blue background. “Snake's Head. It ain't the top o'the snake but it's the last settlement on it. Safest and most well fed too.”

“Oh?” Most well fed, eh? That reminded me how much I liked to eat.

“Yeah. Snake runs all the way through the NCA Farm, you know. They ship food up and down all the time, often with me. Good business. Pays more than being a glorified ferry.” He shot a glare at me, so I

just sort of smiled. "From there you'll go wherever you needa go. Quick trip, right?"

"Uh. Yeah."

"Good. Don't want anypony hearing I kept the NCA or Mr. House waiting." He shook his long grey mane. It reminded me of a pony I used to know. "Too old for this faction shit," He sighed, steering his ship towards one of the docks. "You know? When I was a foal, there was no NCA, or so far away and so small them didn't matter. The Watchers just a dream, the Minotaurs a legend to tell children. The Steel Rangers a nuisance, but left everypony alone, the Enclave kept to themselves, and the Dise gangs fought, yeah, but it didn't seem so. Something. Now everypony is out there choosing sides and playing games like they matter." My, wasn't he the bitter one. "Sun's come back, and I think everypony should learn to play nice." Everypony. Part of my mind made me wonder if that included Zebra's, Griffins, and Minotaurs.

"Nice dream." I said as the boat slowly stopped.

"Yeah. Streamwind, get the anchor; I'm sure the NCA will want to question us. They love their damned questions."

---

"Where are you from?"

"North." I said, rolling my eyes and shifting my stance a bit. We hadn't even got off the dock before a trio of NCA officials came over to question us. The water sloshed under the wooden planks as the ghoul officer glared at me. At first I thought he was Major Lucky, until I realized he wasn't a unicorn. All ghouls sort of look the same to me.

"North is a big place..." the ghoul sneered at me.

"You're very observant."

"And your friends are from...?"

"Flare." I waved a hoof at the grinning Pegasus. "Remnants. High Stakes ." Another gesture. "House operative." I smirked a bit. Did that count as me having powerful friends?

"And the filly?"

"She uh." Now that was awkward. "A former Watcher." I thought I could see him gulp and lick his lips. "We're looking for a caravan that is going to Karkhoof. That enough?"

"Fine." He motioned for the ponies behind him to move. "Welcome to Snake Head. There's a trading Caravan going up to Karkhoof, leaving tomorrow morning. If you're quick, you might find work. Probably get eaten by a shark, but the opportunity is there. Check the NCA headquarters." Muttering to himself, he trotted off the dock and let us pass into the town.

It was okay for a town I suppose, though from the looks of it, all the citizens of the town were NCA soldiers or NCA civilians trying to live out on the frontier. They looked cleaner than the ponies I met in Bridle Hope or Timber, better fed too. I guess there was something to be said for being an NCA civilian.

Serenity actually jumped off my back for once as we walked through the small town, just so she could run around looking at things. Snake Head was a refurbished pre-war town, but it had been refurbished really well. I don't think I had ever seen houses painted so many colours. And from out of every window I smelled baked fresh food! A far cry from the dingy and smell city, that was for sure.

Not that that made it better. A town like this was nice looking, and nice smelling, but it wasn't the same

for security as Dise. Pirates or Raiders could attack by any time, not to mention any group that felt like cutting off a piece of the NCA.

The NCA building was where exactly where I thought it would be. The four-story building near the centre of the town doubled as a watch tower. It seemed... large and grey. The only building in town that lacked the splash of colour. It was, honestly, a bit of a shame. I would have loved to have seen a bright pink office building.

Opening the double doors, we found ourselves in the main reception area. Lots more grey, and I was not surprised. The two ponies at the front desk seemed engaged in conversation so I got my gang to wait just close enough to eavesdrop.

"...Nightmare's Fall?" The pony behind the desk raised a red eyebrow.

"That's what they're calling it." The mare on my side of the counter shrugged. "They say the Ghost of the Big 52 died there."

"How can a ghost die?" the officer asked, to which the mare could only shrug. "Whatever, file your report and I'll have it sent to brass." He snorted as the mare walked away. "Ghosts and nightmares. Next they'll be giving me old mare's tales for reports. Next." He glared at me. Nice guy. He was a dirty blue stallion (it matched his blue NCA barding) with a mess of a red mane that made mine look neat.

"Hello. I heard about a caravan."

"Yes, we have caravans going across the wasteland every day. Care to be more specific?" Oh. Right, I suppose that could help. He didn't have to be such an ass about it.

"To Karkhoof. Trying to apply as guards. If there is room." The pony eyed Subtlety on my back, before shuffling through his papers with magic. It seemed to take a good five minutes before he found the one he was looking for.

"Yes." He peered at the paper. "Two open spots for guards if you want them. Not that surprising really, a lot of ponies won't be caught dead near Zebra town. The route to get there ain't a picnic either And then with the protests going on up there, well it ain't all too surprising." Yes, you said that already. "If you want all four going you'll have to pay for them to come along. 250 caps for both. If you want, that can be taken out of your paycheque, leaving you with a combined 350 caps for the trip."

"Sure." He blinked at me and shrugged, writing down my name when I gave it to him. I needed to get up, there for a job anyway, and I was pretty much already rich, so the exact details didn't bother me much at all. As long as we got up there and didn't die on the way. Fuck, I need to stop jinxing things. I wasn't a superstitious pony, but my luck was shitty as it was.

"Sign here." I took the pen in my mouth and... was interrupted.

"Shouldn't we read the contract first? One can never be sure what the-" I ignored High Stakes (he was being pompous and annoying again), and signed it anyway. "Or we could not." He gave a heavy sigh and shook his head. "How exactly have you survived this long?"

"Carefully." I replied sliding the paper. Okay, maybe I wasn't really that careful, but the line sure was pithy, right?

"Luck." Flare continued with a flap of his wings. "Luck and being the size of a tank, with a gun that is large enough to be mounted on a tank." I rolled my eyes at his antics, but as usual nothing could stop his verbal diarrhoea. "As well as a strange will to live and scarily persistent desire to stop anypony from hurting her daughter. It's not that surprising really, she's more complex the more you get to know her." Flare the psychologist. Turns out he makes a shitty psychologist, actually.

“And she's big'n'strong and stuff. Also, I saw her glare crack'a mirror once.” Thanks for the help Serenity. Though speaking of mirrors I haven't really seen one for a while, and I was middling curious to what I looked like after my numerous stupid fights.

“Right.” High Stakes had a habit of making his face go completely blank at strangely appropriate times. It was actually sort of annoying. “Now that the part where we sign onto a vague job is done with, shall we go on?” Wow. Sarcasm. That's original.

We did in fact go on, though. Upon leaving, I nearly trampled on a couple of foals playing tag right outside the door. After apologizing, I had to stand there and watch for a few minutes, as Serenity decided to join them. Flare flew to the top of the Guard tower while this was happening, leaving me and High Stakes alone. He seemed to shuffle awkwardly at the prospect, but I really didn't care.

Maybe I shouldn't hate every pony I meet?

Well, here goes nothing. “So...” High Stakes looked at me, and sudden awkward silence happened. “You're a mercenary?” Work is a valid topic of conversation, right? There should be like, a small talk class I could take, because I was so bad at it. Like, really.

“Yes.” It didn't help that he suddenly took on my speaking-style. I did one word responses before it was cool. “Been with Mr. House for running on a year now.” Oh yay, he was giving me more information. I need my companions verbose and talkative to make up for me. “Before that, I traveled here and there, taking the jobs that paid the most,” he said, as I watched Serenity successfully tackle a brown colt before running away in victory. “I would be a permanent Hizai, but Mr. House only lets cyborgs into his service. Don't ask why, he's a crazy kook, so I'm on permanent temporary status.” Somepony sounded bitter about that.

Serenity was fast for her age, but a skinny unicorn filly who was 'it' seemed to be at least a year older than her. She went so far as to jump over my back to get away, but the filly caught her anyway, and Serenity was 'it' once more.

“So. Will he hire me?”

High Stakes snorted. “I really couldn't say, Hired. Mr. House is a man of exacting standards, but your leg makes it far more likely. It is not that he hates those who are normal, he just thinks having a gang of cybernetics improves their standing in the city. You may have noticed some ponies look down on those with... accessories like you. Since The Watchers came to town, the problem has become more severe.”

“Oh... Celestia's Vision, right?”

He nodded in affirmative, while at the same time Serenity managed to catch a colt pegasus by the wing and make him 'it'. “The Watchers try to keep it quiet, but the movement started from them. Apparently their leader was a former Watcher doctor.” He smirked at me, “But once again, Mr. House has no preference on how you handle the situation in Karkhoof. He just wants to see what you do.” He wants to see me get shot and almost die? Who am I to judge, I guess.

“This Mr. House. What is he-”

“I am not allowed to answer that. He does most of his work through agents, and I have only met him face-to-face a hoof-full of times. For the most part he wishes to keep certain things secret, I am sure you can understand.” How else to cultivate the 'mysterious benefactor' appearance? Whatever, so long as he paid good on the caps, I couldn't care less what he did.

“Helpful.” Of course, I still couldn't resist the urge to be sarcastic. “Serenity.” I called and she skidded to a stop, just in time for the pegasus colt that was chasing her to slam into her back. “We should go.” I was actually getting really hungry. “Maybe find some place to eat.”

Her pout quickly turned into a grin at the mention of food. “Seeya later, Spring Fresh, Peppermint Bark, Joist, and Peanut.” She said, before quickly running over and jumping on my back. “Peanut's dad owns the restaurant near the front gate. Only one in town, so I think we should go there.” It was the only one in town, where else could we go?

“Food?” I nearly jumped when Flare's upside down head popped into my vision. “I heard food, we should get food. It is one of my very favourite things you know.” Really? You don't say. Not like we needed it to live or anything....

Serenity stood on her hind legs, and planted her forelegs on my head. “Onward noble steed!”

“Excuse m-. Nevermind.” I could let her have this.

The town was small enough that the restaurant was easy to find. All I had to do was walk past a few colourful buildings, find the large sliding gate that was the entrance to town, and find the closest restaurant thing. It turned out to be a stout, one-story building with a large, clean, window on the front.

“Come in! Oh please come in!” an enthusiastic mare said upon seeing us. “Table for four,” she shouted to the back of the restaurant. It seemed longer inside than it had outside, and it had a series of small round tables with small haystacks for seats. Actually, they looked far more comfortable than the chairs I've seen in other places. The waitress (who had a sandwich on a tray as a cutie-mark) led us to one of the unoccupied tables and smiled as we sat down.

Well, except for Serenity, who was short enough that sitting down meant her head was under the table. She had to stand, and even then she was barely over the top of the table. The whole restaurant seemed to have mirrors on every wall. Back in Marefort, Wildfire used to say that having mirrors made the room look larger; I thought that sounded stupid. Still, the mirrors gave me a good look at myself.

I was dirt stained, and my mane was a tangled mess, but I didn't look as bad as I thought. Except for... “My ear... what happened to it?” I twitched it, and my mirror self twitched a little stub of a right ear back at me. Most of it was just... gone.

“Huh.” Serenity looked up at me with a grin. “It was all bloody after you fought them Steel Rangers.” Yes, I noticed they kept being brought up. “And it was just gone. Does it hurt?”

“Only my pride.” Who was I kidding, I had no pride.

“...Daisy sandwiches, daisy soup, and some Brahmin meat if you like... ugh, high protein.” She grimaced at the thought. Apparently she had been talking the whole time I had been checking out my ear.

“Daisy sandwich.” I eyed my companions and they all seemed to nod. Good enough. “Four.”

“Okay!” She seemed relieved that we didn't choose meat. “Right away.” She trotted off towards the back of the restaurant.

“So. What you mean to say is that you managed to get your ear shot off, and are only now realizing it?” High Stakes smirked.

“Yes.” I rolled my eyes as the waitress came back with our food. They looked. Fresh. Fresh food. My mind could barely comprehend that. It had to be some sort of mistake. Fresh food stopped existing around the time the world ended. That I was sure of.

The plate was place before me and I sort of... stared at it. A daisy sandwich, with freshly baked bread, and fresh daises. I must have been dreaming. Slowly I lowered my mouth to the delicious morsel....

BANG

Oh for the fucking sake of fuck. Fuck. This had nothing to do with me, nothing at all. Let me eat my damn sandwich.

Though I really tried not to, I could still barely hear a muffled yell from outside. “We aren’t leaving until we get Flare. We will burn this town down if we have to!”

Me and Flare exchanged a glance and ran for the door. I would rather not get this town burned, if I could help it. Of course, it was only after the fact that I realized I had left Serenity alone with a stallion I trusted as far as I could throw him.... Okay bad analogy, I could throw anyone really far.

We ran up to the gate just in time to see an NCA officer (also a ghoul) yell at the half dozen Steel Rangers outside the gate. “No pony in town by that name, and you'd be fucked up your steel arses if you tried. Now go cry home to your Elder before you get a spanking.”

“Listen, No-coat, we know he's in there and-. He shows himself!” A Steel head turned to me and Flare. I grinned just a bit as I recognized the voice of Curly Fries. “This Foal Killer must be taken into custody! He cannot be allowed to roam free.”

The blue pegasus flicked his yellow and green mane out of his eyes and turned to me, saying so low only I could hear. “Go to Karkhoof, I'll get these steel idiots off your tail and meet you there?” I nodded. “Don't get Serenity killed without me.” With that, he flew into the air and said in his most Flare-like voice. “WELL! YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO CATCH ME!”

I followed his trail as he sped through the air in a blue blur. I kept watching and watching until he was nothing but a speck against the setting sun. As Curly Fries barked orders and the Steel Rangers vainly chased after the speck, I realized something that frightened me to my very soul.

I was worried about Flare.

---

I went back to the restaurant, ate a sandwich (delicious), found a hotel room, went to bed, and had a dream. It was about cupcakes and the proper way to make them using tree sap, then I fought a ninja. You know, sometimes dreams aren't prophetic or important. Though like in all my dreams, Wildfire died at the end.

We had to get up early in the morning to go with the caravan. Apparently, it was going to be another day-and-a-half journey which meant early wake-ups. Luckily, High Stakes was there to wake me up in time, or I may have missed it. I wondered briefly if I could set an alarm on my pipbuck. I quickly smacked myself at the thought because PipBucks were strange magical things that I could not control. Very handy to smack folk with though.

“Serenity.” I poked her sleeping form. “Serenity.” I poked her again causing her tail to flick slightly. Come on, this was ridiculous. “Serenity. Serenity.” Oh come on already just get up. Up!

“Can't you just carry her?” I shot a glare at that snobby unicorn before doing exactly what he suggested. Unsurprisingly, she snuggled into my back and didn't wake up.

Outside the hotel I am too lazy to describe because it was boring, I saw something amazing.

A sunrise.

I had seen them when the world was covered by clouds, but seeing it now was different. The sun basked over the landscape. Over some distant hills, rays of light fanned outward like fire setting the ground and sky alight. The orange rays danced off the multicoloured buildings making them shine like rainbows shining through the morning mist.

Yeah, it was beautiful.

Even High Stakes, that smarmy bastard, seemed impressed. "Let's go; they won't wait forever." Or not. Were his glasses always so shiny? I imagine that made it hard to see.

Snake's Head was deathly still as we moved through the streets. The only sound was our hoofsteps, and the ever-so-subtle snoring of Serenity. It wasn't dark though, and I enjoyed the sight of the rainbow coloured buildings in the morning light, so I was okay with that.

A mare walked up to us as we neared the main gate. "You're late." Fuck you, I'm late. She was a spindly unicorn with a dark grey coat, a green mane that was cut ludicrously short, and a chip on her shoulder. "We need to get past the canyon a'fore night fall, and you ain't helping.... Is that a fucking foal? Whatever, eel food then." I was so going to stab her.

"Eels?"

She stared blank faced at me and face hoofed. "You took this route, and don't know 'bout the eels? Whatever, you'll learn quick'r die." The mare glared and turn away back to the caravan outside the gate. There were a dozen or so waggons full of supplies, and I was surprised to see they were pulled but big, bulky stallions (not as large as I, but then, who was?) instead of brahmin or other such. "You're on the back waggon."

Whatever.

The waggons were different than the ones I'd seen before. The main compartment was stouter and seemed to hold less, and it had a set of stairs up one side leading to the roof. On top, there was a wooden railing just high enough to lean over, a few cushions, and haphazardly-thrown-around provisions. I placed Serenity on one of said cushions and took a seat looking around. Each of the waggons in the line seemed to have at least four ponies on it, and when we started moving they didn't line up in a straight line. Instead, they went two-by-two, with two waggons sticking close enough together to reach into the one beside it.

They moved fast, too, fast enough to jolt Serenity awake. Finally.

"Wha... where are we?" she asked, as a bump in the road sent her spinning off her cushion. Shaking the hair out of her eyes, she looked around and pouted just a little. "Why didn'tcha wake me up?"

"We tried." I said simply, favouring her with a smile. Smiles are favourable right?

"Often," High Stakes said plainly, taking his weapons out of his saddle bags. He claimed to be mercenary, so I was more than a little interested in the weapons he brought. The first seemed to be a riot shotgun with an extended barrel. The other was .308 calibre bolt-action rifle with ironsights. I wasn't that impressed. He seemed to test out the sight of his gun as he said, "I am surprised you stayed asleep as long as you did. You are certainly a determined foal."

"I'm not a foal," she said with a determined glare. So he was half right at least. "I'm a big pony. Just... don't have my cutie-mark yet. I will soon! You'll see." High Stakes only chuckled and fiddled with his glasses at that. Oh what I wouldn't do for a random story....

Did I really miss Flare? He had barely been gone half a day. It was official, I was crazy.

"I know. Ignore him." I smiled at Serenity but she just stomped off to a corner to brush Scootaborg's mane.

"It is not polite to ignore one's travelling companion." We ignored Flare too, but at least he had the good manners not to notice. Rolling my eyes, I glanced over to the cart beside us. Four ponies rode atop it looking strangely grim.

Leaning over the edge of the cart, I called to the nearest pony. “What’s with this route?” She was a tiny (mind you most everypony looked tiny from where I stood) orange unicorn with a white and red striped mane. I could feel her magic flare up as she repositioned her rifle so she could lean in over the gap that separated us.

“Land Sharks.”

...

“What?”

She blinked in disbelief at me. I returned the favour. “Land Sharks... That's what we call'em anyway. Showed up about fifteen years back. Tainted quarry eels that can swim through the ground without breaking it.” How did that make any sense. “Need this route tho-”

“Backup,” a purple stallion, who was resting with his hat over his eyes, said, “shut up. The fucking noobs didn't bother to learn, let them be eaten.” I made a mental note to shoot the fuck out of that guy. It didn't look like it'd be that difficult. The unicorn seemed lanky, with a long green mane sticking out from under his hat.

“Might be I push you out and let 'em take you,” she spat back. The purple stallion just chuckled and went back to his resting. “Ignore Dragonslayer; he's an ass.”

“Dragonslayer?” That was more than a little bit impressive. Even if he was an ass.

“Well...,” Backup seemed a bit apprehensive about talking behind his back. Or face, or, whatever. “He claims to have killed a dragon. Way he tells it, he lured a dragon into a tight place where it couldn't move very well, painted a mannequin to look like him, dressed it up in his barding and explosives. The dragon thought he'd caught up, tried to lunge, and had his head blown off for the trouble. Been callin' himself that since, but I find it sketchy.”

“It's true,” the stallion pretending to be sleeping said. “Fed my home town for a year. Named it Dragon's Reach after me.” I eyed his flank, looking for a dragon-slaying cutie-mark, but it was hidden by his barding.

“Whatever.” Backup rolled her eyes. “Fact o'the matter is he uses that for a name now. A bit cocky,” Dragonslayer snorted, “but whatever. Like I was saying, this route is dangerous, but the alternative takes like, a week.” She pointed forward as the rows of fast moving waggons we were following.

The road was not a rutted dirt one like I was used to, but instead made from nearly intact concrete. The old-world highway stretched on into the horizon, highlit by the rising sun so I could barely see. Wait... Digging into my bag I brought out my pink sunglasses and found my sight much better. Not too far off, the highway dipped suddenly as two wall struck out on either side forming a huge canyon.

Right off to the side of the road I saw a huge billboard that managed to survive the past two hundred years. On it's weathered face was what looked like three ponies in power armour (It looked like Steel Rangers, but i wasn't sure) standing in front of what looked like a small pre-war town. On it were the words “Have No Fear Caledonians, The Equestrian Army Is Here To Protect You.” Spray painted in red below it were the words, “Thanks. Good Job.”

“An old Caledonian legend says that when Discord first ruled the earth, he found the lands of Caledonia too flat and perfect. So he struck out at it, and created these huge canyons and mountains to break it up. That's why there are so many ravines and hills that seem to make no sense.” Backup nodded at me with a smile. I didn't know for magic or legends but I guess that was as good a theory as any.

“Why would he do that? It's just silly.” I wasn't sure when Serenity started listening in. The speed of the

carts made her mane whip into her face, and she angrily sought to disentangle herself. “Why would he do that?”

The unicorn shrugged and gave her very best patronizing smile towards my filly. “Why would Discord do anything?” Serenity considered that for a second before Backup answered. “Because he's Discord. It's in the name.”

“But... my name's Serenity, and sometimes I do un-serene things.” That was far too logical for my tiny brain to handle, so I just sat back and watched to see if Backup could come up with a smarter answer than me.

Backup had nothing. Once again, my filly proved smarter than full grown mares.

Did I just call her my filly? She was clearly infecting my brain with thoughts of motherhood.

“Maybe,” High Stakes felt the need to interrupted what was clearly a mare's only conversation, “physical personifications of elements of nature name themselves more accurately than wasteland ponies do. It's much harder to explain an element of of Chaos being called Tim, than it is a less than serene unicorn being called Serenity.” Again with the being logical thing. I wholeheartedly disapproved. His glasses seemed to shine in the sunlight.

How did he do that?

I turned my head to the sun and tried to tilt my head down. Then a little to the right. Maybe if I leaned into it I could get the light to hit my glasses just right. What about if I-

“What are you doing?” I turned my head to High Stakes to see his glasses had returned to their normal not shiny state.

“How do you do that?” He simply raised and eyebrow. “Your glasses. They shine sometime. How can you see?” There! They did it again as I mentioned it. That couldn't have been natural. Maybe some sort of Unicorn magic? I'd have to ask Serenity sometime.

“Uh....” He blinked at me as his glasses topped shining. “I'm not sure, I guess it helps when your glasses aren't pink....” Was that an insult? I liked my glasses.... “Just. Nevermind. We have land sharks to watch out for....”

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The walls of the canyon rose above us-- foreboding, brown, impassible walls. The canyon seemed to stretch on forever, and only the sun above stopped me from feeling like I was trapped in a dark tunnel again. The highway was tight here and littered with holes. It seemed to take an inordinate amount of effort for the ponies pulling the carts to keep up their speed while dodging the potholes.

“Through solid stone....” I mumbled to myself. I'd heard once that Hell Hounds could dig faster than a pony could run, but to pass through it as if it wasn't even there...? It just seemed... weird and unnatural.

“Don't worry too much,” Backup said in the cart beside me, “sometimes they don't ever show up.” Right. I wanted to believe her, but the look on her face made it clear she was lying. Even if she had managed to hide the grim smile, I could see Dragonslayer and the two other ponies in her cart, and I could see the way the other ponies rode glumly through the pass in front of me. “There's two types. The biggies and the smalls. The small ones latch onto the biggies and jump off near ponies, and they're the real danger. Poisonous fucker can kill a pony in ten minutes flat.” I gulped and nodded.

“So. Why not the long way?”

“Well....” Backup seemed to be searching for the words. “The NCA needs the zebras, ya know? They can make water cleansing talismans, not as potent as pre-war stuff but effective. Thing is they need lots,

often to keep their farm running so to them it's a calculated risk." Gambling with ponies lives? Lovely.

A roar shut me up.

It echoed through the chasm making my coat stand up on end. "Serenity," I said softly. "Wear your cloak." If nothing else, it might stop a poisonous bite. She nodded and quickly draped it over herself, the brown of it nearly blending in with the waggon floor. "And," I slid over the pistol I had got back in the tunnels. There was a faint smile on her lips, but I could see she was tentative when it came to picking it up. Bad memories with it and all. "Just in case."

"Okay..." She looked at it and I saw a pink glow engulf the weapon, floating it in the air. "I... don't want to hurt anypony with it."

"You won't..." I felt a surge of magic behind me, and I turned to see High Stakes standing tall with his two weapons floating in red beside him, and the breeze whipping at his red mane. He sure liked to be dramatic.

Another roar shook the ravine.

"Mr. House needs Karkhoof dealt with so it would be my personal suggestion that you do not die." Thanks, Mr Tall Unicorn. You're always so helpful. I had to wonder if ponies called him Captain Obvious behind his back.

Ponies started screaming. The jolt of extra speed nearly took me off my feet. I searched the ground, but I couldn't see it. Somepony had seen something. I didn't know what, but it had spooked them. Of course that was until I noticed the shadow. I'd thought it was only a trick of the cavern at first.

Until I looked up.

Holy fucking shit. The Eel looked like a giant red snake with a million green spines sticking off it. It's dragon-like mouth was wide open and it was falling. It wasn't the only one. As I looked up, two more sprang from holes in the side of the rock wall and started their freefall.

Oh, and one was aiming straight towards us.

Subtlety blasted at the thing. I saw it connect in a flurry of green gunk and a spark of flame, but it didn't even slow down. I grabbed Serenity and dove. The beast crashed into our cart, sheering half of it off. Suddenly, I was sliding. I managed to hang on by slamming my metal hoof through the floor, catching me. Most of my body was left hanging slamming into the remains of the cart, water from the waggon's cargo spilling on the ground marking our trail. The road seemed to zip past me as I looked down, making me dizzy. I looked back at the huge red beast. It wasn't falling into the ground, but seemed to pass through it like a fish through water.

The green spines on it's back wiggled for a second before breaking off and leaping off. No. Not green spines, other eels. They hit the ground, passed through it, and then leaped through the air a second later, much closer than they had been.

My leg slammed painfully against the remains of the waggon. Despite the condition of their vehicle, the ponies hitched to the front still ran, but that may have been just to save their own lives. Back on the cart, Serenity clung tightly to the railings near Backup's cart, and High Stakes managed to stand despite the now-sloped floor. Show off.

"Help!" I calmly suggested to High Stakes. As he started towards my hanging body, I corrected him. "Not me! Serenity." he gave me the blankest look as if hanging by my metal leg near poisonous flesh eating land sharks was more important than a filly! Idiot. With a flurry of magic I gave a sigh of relief as he lifted Serenity onto Backup's cart. Thank Celestia she was safe at least.

Pain. Tears watered in my eyes from the fiery pain in my leg, but I forced them away. One of those green fuckers were hanging off me, chewing at my flesh with what looked like glee.

Ten minutes until death? Challenge accepted.

As I flapped in the wind, my other leg kicked at the beast. It seemed to growl low and deep at me, so I kicked it again. The third time, my hoof found it's eye, and it flew off this a squish. Despite everything I knew, it still was a shock when it didn't slam into the ground but fall through it.

Looking back towards High Stakes, I reached out and grabbed his hoof which he at some point extended at me. I could see his green eyes watching my wounded leg with near concern. Blood dripped from it, and I could have sworn I felt the burn of poison snaking through it, but dammit there wasn't time. With a tug, I tore my metal leg from where I smashed it through the floor, and he, with magical enhanced strength, lifted me from the brink.

“Maybe we should switch rides?” He nodded his head towards Backup's cart. Totally Captain Obvious.

Not bothering to worry about leaping at high speed from cart to cart, I crossed the gap. I was just in time to see Serenity blow away a land shark with her pistol. That's momma's girl.

Fuck. Ignore that last sentence.

“Where the hell have you been!” Being worm food. You? “Get shooting.” Backup didn't even look my way as her rifle fired shot after shot off the back of the waggon. The green beasts jumped up towards her again and again, but she and Dragonslayer did a good job keeping them at bay. Sort of. To my sides I could see the land sharks flying through the air just at eye level before diving back into the ground.

“Serenity. Behind me.” I was a good shield, even if I was bleeding a little bit.

The first eel that Subtlety hit flew backwards through the air, catching fire and landing with a thud on the concrete. Okay, they only moved through the ground when alive. It had to have been some sort of taint magic. That was a thing, right?

Ack. My rambling thought process distracted me enough to let a eel get too close. Luckily, the fucking thing couldn't eat steel. My metal leg kicked it off, lining me up for what must have been the easiest shot in the world. The beast became engulfed in flames, and rammed into another shark in mid air, setting it on fire too.

Yeah, I'm pretty awesome.

High Stakes, for his annoyingness, wasn't bad either. He switched between his rifle and shotgun with almost scary ease. The further beasts got a taste of .308 lead, but the ones that got too close took a buckshot to the face. Either way, they fell in droves, making me feel just a little jealous. How was I supposed to compete with a unicorn?

“Serenity.” I said feeling something being tied around my back leg. “Is this really the time.” I turned my head to look at her, but she didn't even acknowledge me. At least she had something to occupy her mind other than green and red death flying in at every angle.

Not for the first time I regretted dragging her around with me.

“SHIT!” Dragonslayer turned and pointed.

I looked up towards the rest of the caravan just in time for to see a red quarray eel leap out of the ground. It caught an entire waggon whole. With a snap it's giant mouth closed. Bits of pony and wood rained over the canyon, but that wasn't what worried me. I was more concerned with the fact our cart was about to run right beside the giant red mass, and it was still squirming with smaller eels.

“Serenity!” She didn't need to be told twice to use me as cover as the five of us turned to the side of the cart. “High Stakes, Dragonslayer, take point. Backup, beside me.”

“Who put you in charge?” Dragonslayer cried. Well, obviously I did. Instead of answering, I unleashed eight shots of fire into the giant eel's side, setting a whole section ablaze. Green eels peeled off the beast and hit the ground as burning sludge. If that didn't put me in charge, I'd no idea what would. Dragonslayer declined to comment, so I guess that left me in charge.

“I need a grenade.” In a second, one was soaring through the air. I caught it with my mouth, and shoved it into one of my barding's front pockets, just in time for the first wave.

The green vermin flew from the top of the giant, raining down on top of us. I could hear the remaining ponies pulling our old cart fall and scream. It made me shiver, but I couldn't afford to watch them die. Subtlety flared out. Part of me hated having to waste fire bullets on vermin, but fuck these vermin. They were terrible. And they bit me! Subtlety turned everything it touched into ash, but it fired slowly, and I had to reload so very often. Even Backup with her rifle did better, but not with nearly as much class.

Turning to my side, I realized how good a thing it was that High Stakes was covering our drivers' flanks. Otherwise despite all my planning, we'd still be really, really dead. Congratulations came later!

Fuck, we were getting too close. Our cart was going to pass by the main beast in seconds. I really hoped this worked.

“Cover my flank!” I screamed, biting into my bridle. Eight shots. Reload. Eight more shots. I had to keep firing until it looked right. The thing had hard skin, but if I could make a big enough hole. I fired eight more fire bullets into the beast. I made the mistake of looking up and seeing just how little of the beast I was actually hurting. It was like an ant stabbing a hellhound.

More green bastards fell. Shots blared out, but I deafened myself to it. We inched closer as if in slow motion. There, the red scales melted down its body. There was my target. The grenade was cool in my mouth. Beyond all reasoning I was calm, even with the fire and pain around me. There. The grenade left my mouth, and I pushed at it hard with my metal leg. I didn't feel my leg enter the burning Eel, but when I tore it free it was covered in blood and guts. Lovely.

Our cart passed the beast. Three seconds passed.

BOOM

There was a scream like nothing else I'd heard before. It was an otherworldly wail that seemed to shake the ground. Just hearing it made my heart beat faster in my chest. The creature continued its cry as it fell backward slowly, sinking into the ground.

I let out the breath I was holding. Whatever it was, it wasn't dead, but I doubt it'd feel like following us after that... Or I just made it angry. I sucked in another breath and leaned over the railing. The road behind us was deathly silent. Corpses of ponies and beasts alike seemed to litter the canyon, strewn haphazardly between bits of splintered wood and burning carcasses. It smelled like fiery death.

“Fuck.” I spun, and instinct made me lower my head to my bridle. Dragonslayer was standing above Backup's body, sweat drenching his brow. The mare was bleeding heavily, the blood pooling on the floor around her, from a bite wound to her flank. Already, I could see her begin to pale. Ten minutes. That's what she said. Her wound seemed to already be infected with a strange smelling green pus. I wasn't sure when she was bit, but I don't think it mattered....

I looked back at the bite on my leg. Against all logic it was... normal. Like any other wound I've had, it stung, but I wasn't dying. I was poisoned, I should be dying....

"Hurts...." I ran over to the dying mare. Serenity was wiping backup's brow, and started to pour a healing potion down her throat. "No...." She gave a halfhearted wave of her hoof. "No... dying...." I stood beside her, my body casting a shadow over her face. Her eyes shot to me, and I could see how weary she looked. So old. "Finish i-"

BANG

Serenity shrieked and started to sob. Bits of Backup's skull skidded across the cart, as even more blood stained the floor. Among other fluids. Dragonslayer, he with a stupid name, had a smoking gun glowing beside him.

So I kicked him. Not hard. Just hard enough to send him to the floor so I could press my metal leg down on his throat. Just a little more pressure and his head would pop. "What the fuck!" Maybe I shouldn't have yelled. I was too stressed to care. "Why did you-"

"She was dying. Tends to be, you know. Deadly. There is no cure, not yet. I gave her relief. Would you prefer she suffer?" What? No! We should have helped. We could have. We.... I wasn't supposed to care was I? When I cared about ponies they always died, so why did I start again?

I lifted my foot off.

She was just one pony. A pony I just met. She was dying anyway. He did the right thing.

So why did I care?

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"It's your fault they're dead." I didn't wince at the accusation. I let it flow over me, I let myself ignore it. "You took too damn long getting ready. You were late. We leave for a fucking reason. We get there before they wake up; we get there when they're too groggy to attack. Because of you, we lost three carts, and over a dozen good ponies." My face was stern. So long as I didn't show emotions her accusations couldn't sting.

"Sorry."

"Sorry, won't bring back those ponies' lives!" the grey mare said, spraying spittle in my face. It wasn't my fault those ponies died. The NCA decided their lives were worth the Zebra's talismans, and the ponies themselves decided it was worth the risk. The few minutes I was late had changed nothing, and she knew it. I couldn't blame her for lashing out at me, though. She had lost more ponies this run than the last ten runs combined and she needed somepony to blame.

I was good at taking the blame.

"Don't you have anything to say!?" The camp would have been quiet if she was not yelling. The caravan had travelled far after the incident with the Eels. No pony talked much. We had lost two carts and a handful of other ponies. By the time we stopped for the night, everypony was exhausted mentally and physically, so much so that only a few stayed up to watch me get yelled at.

"Sorry."

"Get out of my camp. You and your friends. Get out and don't come back." She glared at me. Not me. She was mad at her own failure and used me as a punching bag. I was okay with that. I didn't need the caps for this trip, I just needed to get to Karkhoof. I forget why. It didn't seem important.

Was I really still upset about Backup? I had known Lye for longer, but I managed to put her into the that place in the back of my mind that I never touched. Why couldn't I do that for Backup?

Maybe it had something to do with Serenity's tears. Or the fact she succumbed to the poison and I

didn't. The thought made my back leg itch, but I was still alive. Somehow.

The thoughts were making my head hurt. I turned away from the still-screaming mare, and headed for my companions. She kicked me out, so I left. It meant I wasn't on her payroll anymore so I didn't have to play punching bag for her.

“Serenity, Stakes.” I said, walking up to them. Despite the fact it was well-past sundown, they both seemed well awake. It may have something to do with the fact I made them take a long nap after the land shark incident. Honestly, I half-expected this outcome. The mare would need to blame somepony, and who better than a slow earth pony? I didn't begrudge her it, so long as she left Serenity out of it.

“We need to go.” I finished. High Stakes showed a spark of annoyance, then give a resigned sigh. Serenity, on the other hoof, just jumped onto my back and got comfortable. You let a sick filly ride on your back once, and you're a taxi for life. “Got kicked out. Because we were late.”

“Glad to see the NCA has kept their common sense and good manners in these troubled times.” Was that a joke? I wasn't quite sure, so I nodded. I do that a lot. Often times I nod dumbly. I don't really know what makes a nod dumb, but I think it happens when I nod.

“Right.”

Nothing else left to say, I led my squad outside the camp. The ground was rough and rocky, but between my pipbuck and the stars above, we could see fine. After we left the camp, everything became.... Quiet. The sounds of the camp behind us slowly faded, and it seemed no pony was up for talking. Inanely, I missed Flare. He would never have let it get so quiet.... Since when did I find quietness a bad thing?

Damn that blue pony.

It made no sense. I didn't even like him. He was just some stupid pony that followed me around. Was I so devoid of friends in my life that I would consider such an annoying braggart one? Or maybe... maybe I felt bad for what happened to him back at the Steel Rangers. But that would imply I cared about anypony beside myself, which was clearly not true. Except for Serenity of course.... And Wildfire. That filly whose name I refused to think of. Something in the back of my head told me Pearly was a good pony too. And Photo Finish, but only because she helped me. And Backup for some reason....

For Celestia's sake, I cared about ponies. I swore off that, and yet here it was again. Coming back. It needed to change. When I cared, ponies died.

“Why did you leave?” High Stakes asked quietly, careful not to wake up Serenity. How did that filly sleep so much? “You could have demanded to stay. You could have pressured her into giving you your pay.”

“She told me to. It was an order.” It was simple enough. Until she kicked me out I would follow her orders.

“So? She didn't fulfil her end of the bargain; why should you?”

“I....” I took a look around. The highway seemed to stretch on forever into the night, spiralling up a steep hill before being obscured by ever growing mountains. It was a simple question he asked, but he just wouldn't understand. “Because. She ordered me.”

“Do you always act like that? Like you are some tool to be used, abused, and tossed away at your employer's whims. Despite your job, you are still a pony.” Really? He really didn't know me very well if he was going to try to philosophize at me.

“No. I am a tool. That's the way it should be.” Cold, emotionless. A perfect weapon. I had tried to be that at the start, and it all broke down when I killed Silver Bullet. So what was I now? I wasn't Silver Storm, but I wasn't really Hired Gun either. “Ponies use me as a tool. I'm okay. The blood is on their hooves.” Not mine. I was just a tool, a gun for other ponies to shoot. I....

Don't know.

“That's flimsy reasoning.” Yes, it really was wasn't it? Even for me. “Why do you do it?”

I stopped. I could feel the darkness of the night engulfing me and there was a tightening in my stomach. The road up to Karkhoof suddenly seemed so.... Pointless. What reason did I have to go up there? Why did I even want to work for Mr. House? I had kept on moving, kept on walking because I wanted to *survive*, but was that really enough? My survival for the lives of all the ponies I killed. I was just another pawn in a world of pawns, ready to be used and thrown away, so did it even matter. Eventually I was going to die, my meaningless life extinguished. So why did I try? For some misguided sense of pride or self-worth? I could feel my knees weaken as I slowly began to realize that I had no reason for walking, no reason for living, and no hope at-

There was a sound that took me out of my sudden bout of over dramatic emotion.

A snore. I turned my head and saw Serenity on my back. She seemed even smaller then, curled up on my back, her sleeping face illuminated by Luna's light. She was innocent, a little light in the big dumb darkness that blanketed the wasteland. She was something worth protecting, something that needed to be cared for.

But not by me. She deserved better.

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Karkhoof was not hard to find. We followed the highway even as it circled through a series of tight mountain passes. Luckily, even as we walked higher and higher there were no sheer cliffs or steep hills to aggravate my not-fear-of-heights. It was a beautiful area though. High peaks of mountaintops rose all around, making it hard not to stop and marvel at them. As we followed along, between brown trees, I saw smoke and smelt fire.

It was a camp. And a large one.

“Doesn't that hurt?” Serenity stood on my back, leaning over to see the wound on my leg. We had walked all through the night, and the sun was just beginning to show itself. I paused for a second to admire the sun cresting over white capped mountain tips as a wind sent spirals of snow off a peak and into the distance.

“No.” It did. Only a little though, as I had taken a shot of med-x during the night. “Don't worry.” She would worry of course. Even with the bandage job she gave it, she was still sure it needed a health potion. Not that we had any to spare. Still, I could see it bothered her. She wanted so much to be a good, helpful pony....

I stopped for a second.

The three of us had travelled a long ways since the fight with the Steel Rangers. From boats, to caravans, to being kicked out and forced to walk. It seemed to happen so fast, but it all seemed.... I'm not sure. I wasn't sure of much. Part of me desperately wanted to return to Dise, because even in chaos there was stability. The sense that you could find a place, even if it was at the lowest rung. Here, in the wastes, who knows? I could travel from place to place, fight to fight, and never really find something steady.

“Are we not going? Mr. House will not wait forever.” High Stakes didn't seem tired from our all

night hiking trip up a mountain. He was a mercenary after all, so that was to be expected.

“Yeah.” The camp was not very well defended. A few turned-out slabs of concrete served as a barrier at the end of the highway. Beyond the two mercenary guards that stood behind the barricade was a mishmash of tents strewn around a series of fire pits. Unsurprisingly, most seemed similar to the tents found in The Watchers camp. Somewhere deep in the camp a flagpole rose. Flapping from its crest was a simple flag showing a rising sun.

Behind the camp, I could just barely see Karkhoof. It had small grey walls that didn't seem like they'd hold well if Celestia's Vision decided to kill all the zebras themselves. Not that I really cared either way. I was just here to do my job and get one of the factions to leave. Or die. Whatever worked, I suppose.

“Halt, who goes there?” Really, that old bit? Apparently somepony took their job way too seriously.

I trotted slowly up to the guards and felt a slight burning as they started to point their weapons magically at me. “Hey.” I looked at the automatic rifle floating by one of the guards' side. “Stop that. I work for House. Need to speak with whoever runs the camp.”

The guards stopped. Apparently, even way out here in the wastes, House still had clout. Even when dealing with ponies known to protest his cybernetic company. Sort of interesting. I filed that away into 'things that may be useful later' section of my brain.

“Who are you?”

I started to respond, but High Stakes trotted in front of me. So much for letting me handle the situation. “I am Mr. High Stakes, representative of Mr. House. It is requested we are allowed access to the camp.” The guard glared for a second but then sort of shrugged.

“Sure,” he said with a hint of a smirk. “Go ahead. Righteous Song is near the gate. Don't do anything... stupid.”

That was. Interesting. High Stakes lead us through the camp so deftly I'd have thought he'd been there before, except the camp had only been there a week at most. Maybe he was just a good pathfinder. Not a bad trait to have. Upon closer inspection, I determined the multitude of tents were the exact same as the ones found in The Watcher's compound.

There was that connection again. There were always connections between the Watchers and Celestia's Vision. Which was strange to me, because Serenity was clearly taught enough about cybernetics to be obsessed with them, and Morowind was a cybernetics expert. Yet Celestia's Vision hated cybernetics as a rule, so how connected to the Watchers could they be?

“...wicked things, but you need not hear it from me! Look through these bars and see for yourself. Look at how they hate you, look at how they fear and despise you. Discord tried to make ponies, but he could not, and see the fruit of his work. So close to us, so close the majesty that Celestia designed and yet so flawed. So filled with anger and hatred. They pervert our great land and destroyed our beautiful kingdom, and yet we let them scavenge off our corpse! How can this be allowed?”

We heard the voice before we saw the crowd. It seemed all the ponies in the camp had swarmed the giant metal gate to Karkhoof in order to hear Righteous Song. She wasn't hard to miss, standing confidently on top of a soap box and spew hate convincingly. Behind her stood the gate and behind that, I could see a half dozen Zebra's watching on with thinly-concealed rage.

“So, we ask you again! Will you leave peacefully?” Song was a short white unicorn mare with a long blond mane and a rising sun for a cutie-mark. Despite her size, when she spoke, it was very hard not to listen. There was a sense of command about it that couldn't be ignored.

“Leave us alone!” one of the Zebra's shouted.

“When you leave, my stripped friend.” Song smirked. “You have three days, if you are not gone by then may Celestia save your soul.” She jumped off the soap box and started walking through the crowd. The masses of ponies screamed and surged around her, but nopony seemed to get close enough to touch. They wanted to praise Song but were careful not to touch her.

This was easy to see from my vantage point, being tall has it's advantages. I started moving towards Song... only for the crowd to push me back violently. Dammit. I tried again, but the ponies pushed me back again, as if I wasn't even there. How many ponies were even here? I had no idea Celestia's Vision attracted so many stupid ponies.

“Why not kick your way through?” Serenity asked, resting her forelegs on top of my head.

“Because.” I grunted trying to force my way through the crowd. “hard to make a deal. With a pony. After you kick their followers.”

Grah! I stepped back and watched the crowd. How could one pony have that many fans! It wasn't like she was the Bringer of Light, or Security, or anything. She wasn't a hero; she was just some random pony that liked to talk. But damn, her followers were determined not to let me get a word in edge wise.

“So. You are thinking of siding with Celestia's Vision, despite their ideas on cybernetics.” Shut the fuck up, High Stakes. At least when Flare talked he said things worth listening to. Or were at least entertaining. “This is an interesting choice.”

“Whatever.” I turned back to the camp, ignoring Song for the time. I had already agreed to find some way to break these ponies up, but I didn't have a sweet clue as to how. If only I could get an easy answer.

“You.” I looked up suddenly to see a pony staring at me. Wait.

“Dragonslayer?” Why was he here? The Caravan wasn't supposed to be here for a few hours at least. I could feel Serenity tense up at the name on my back. She was still mad about Backup. I couldn't blame her. She was so innocent. The only time I'd seen her not balk at death was when I killed the slavers that I almost sold her to.... That was a bad memory.

“Oh, you remember. Good. That will make this a tad easier.” He followed me.... But why? “What exactly is your business here?” I blinked at the purple unicorn. He looked different somehow. More confident, which was impressive considering how cocky he had been before. The wind blew his green mane into his eyes, but he didn't even blink. “You're here on House's orders.”

“You-” High Stakes took a step forward. “How do you know that? This mission is a secret, so I kindly as-”

“Shut it, four eyes.” That was original. “Do you really think the Dise gangs don't spy on Mr. House? I recognized you the second I laid my eyes on you. Not that hard to remember, seeing as you're the only non-cyberpony House has on his payroll. When I saw Miss Hired Gun, I knew exactly what was going on.”

“You're a dummy; you don't know anything.” Way to go Serenity.

“Maybe, little miss. My points stands.” The Unicorn adjusted his hat sending a flare of pain through my shoulder.... Wait.

A light bulb went off in my head.

Dragonslayer had to have been following us to get here. But he hadn't used magic or I would have sensed it. That meant he purposely left his magic off, so he must have known about my sensing skill.

Whoever this pony was, he wasn't tell the telling whole truth. He knew about my power, so who was he working for?

"I need you to do a job for me," Dragonslayer said crossing his legs casually. "I need you to start a war." I looked around quickly to make sure we were alone. The crowd of ponies had moved on, and over at the gate the Zebras had left, too. Why was it so quiet all of a sudden? "Moreover, I need you to make sure it looks like the Zebras started it."

"Who are you working for Mr-" I cut High Stakes off before he thought he actually got a say.

"Okay." I said. "But. I want the payment up front."

Dragonslayer laughed. "Deal. It doesn't matter who wins. Just make sure the Zebras start it." With a flurry of magic, he took out a single pistol.

Not an ordinary pistol though. It had intricate silver etchings in the handle, and seemed to be polished to a shine. It looked .32 calibre, but it was not a make I recognized. I leaned in close to inspect it, and found it.... Strange. I wasn't sure how to explain, but it was different than any pony pistol.

"A zebra pistol. Enchanted to make slugs fly faster and hit harder. This along with 500 caps." I licked my lips and nodded. It was a good weapon.

Deals were made, caps were exchanged, and Dragonslayer vanished into the distance. Or something. I never did ask who he worked for. I suppose it really didn't matter. A contract from one pony was as good as a contract from any other. When he was far enough away I helped Serenity off my back and ignored the protests of High Stakes.

"Serenity." I went to one knee and looked her in the eyes. She was upset. At me for taking this job. At Dragonslayer. At everyone it seemed like. "Here." I laid the pistol in front of her. In a second all of her sadness vanished and she stared in shock at me. I was a horrible parent and a horrible caretaker. If nothing else, this proved that. "You want to follow me. That's okay. But it's dangerous. You can have this. I...." Didn't want to give her a weapon. I didn't want to ruin her innocence. But she needed to protect herself. I realized this with the land sharks. "I don't want you fighting with me. It is for emergencies. If you have no other option."

She nodded and lifted the weapon up slowly, marvelling at it.

It was not a good sight. She was innocent, and I was not. If she had to come with me, I wanted to make sure she could protect herself. The sight of her holding a gun though.... It was hard for me to take. She was going to become me, and she could be so much better. She needed to leave, to go back with the Watchers. And I knew how to convince her.

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"I know you."

I seemed to be getting more popular. Or more noticed. Maybe it had something to do with my my particular hair colouration. Or my strange cutie mark. Or, far more likely, that I was a huge hulking mare with a metal leg. We were a rare breed in the wasteland, so I am sure I made an impression on most ponies. Somehow I think becoming a lackey to Mr. House was not going to help my infamy issues.

The Zebra on the other side of the gate was a large kind. Not as large as I was, but it took a special pony to match me. "Who are you?" It was still midday at this point. I knew the caravan should be coming into the camp any moment and I was hurrying to make myself scarce before then.

"I." The Zebra glared at me. "We met. At stable 123." I don't think I remember seeing any Zebra's

there. "Me and two ponies. You convinced us to leave when we tried to capture your daughter." She's not my daughter.

"I'm not her daughter." Wait, what? Serenity was suddenly lying on top of my head grinning at the zebra. "Not yet but soon will be. Right?" I...

Had to wonder if she knew how her words made me feel. If she was just using my insecurities to twist my gut until I gave in.... Nah. That couldn't be it.

"Not important. When we left the stable, my two companions died in a raider attack. I guess I have you to thank." Not a problem. Always happy to help. "Doesn't matter. They were asses anyway. Called back to the clan... what exactly do you want?"

"Why. To help of course." I gave him the most sincere smile I could muster. As it turned out, I was pretty good at mustering smiles. The Zebra didn't seem that convinced. "And because Mr. House of Dise sent me to aid you." I nodded my head towards the massive form of Subtlety.

"Mr. House? Why would he care?" Thankfully, High Stakes came to my rescue with the best answer.

"Celestia's Vision has been plaguing his operations in Dise for months. Enemy of my enemy, so on and so forth. " That was true to the extent it was a believable lie. However it would make no sense for House to send agents against a group that is currently leaving him alone.

Yeah, but on the other hoof he did send me here. To deal with the situation. Would he really send a recruit on a mission that potentially decided the fate of an entire village? Come to think of it, I barely knew anything about him. Most ponies seemed to be forthcoming with information. All I knew was that he liked cybernetics, possibly was around before the war (maybe a super advanced cyborg), and didn't meddle much with politics.

The zebra looked contemplative. "I shall speak to the elder. Don't move." The zebra stalked away giving me plenty of time to examine the zebras' compound.

The wall was not as large as Dise's, but it looked more. Sturdy. A maybe twelve-foot-high barrier made in the pre-war era. It was more designed to stop ponies from looking in than it was to stop them from breaking it. Hanging above the wall and splattered with spray paint was a sign that read, 'Karkhoof Vacations'. Peering inside the complex, I saw two rows of fake log cabins placed in a semi-circle around the gate. In the centre, directly in front of the gate, was a large three story building that could only have been the administrative building. Or something.

I couldn't see any zebras though. Besides the one that was guarding the gate (who apparently knew me), all the others seemed to be holed up in their houses waiting for the ponies to leave them alone.... Why exactly did ponies hate Zebras? I mean, I know there was a war a fifth of a millennium ago, but that hardly seemed relevant. Yes, ponies still hated zebras, and vice versa. Two hundred years was far too long to hold a grudge. So what if my great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandmother got killed by a zebra? Ponies confused me.

"Why do they have stripes?" Serenity asked.

"Because they are zebras. Why else?" I wondered if it was impossible for High Stakes not to be haughty. It didn't help that from what I've seen he was actually skilled enough to warrant arrogance.

"But... I mean why do zebras have stripes? Wha'do they do?" Out of the corner of my eye I could see a flash of confusion on the pale green unicorn's face.

"They... you know, I am not rightly sure. I suppose they do the same thing as a ponies' colour, which is to say little-to-nothing." I chuckled a bit at the explanation. I didn't expect that to sate Serenity's curiosity, and she moved to ask more, but the guard came back. Serenity was smart enough to be quite

during negotiations, at least most of the time.

The zebra returned with an elderly zebra mare. Is mare the correct term? Whatever, I'm going with mare. The Zebra that I apparently knew bowed respectfully. "Thank you, Zahini. Leave us." The zebra backed away just far enough so he couldn't hear but still close enough to watch. "I am Ahgna. Who are you?"

"Hired Gun...."

"Serenity!"

"I am High Stakes. It is a pleasure."

That about covered it. The zebra's deep grey eyes studied us closely, lingering and narrowing at my metal leg. "Why?" Not this question again. I'd enough of naval gazing for the moment, thank you very much. "These... ponies hate us. The NCA merely tolerates us. Why does this, House, care?" There was a sharpness to her tone that could only have come from many years of cynicism.

I coughed into my hoof and waited for High Stakes to answer. He didn't and instead stared blank faced at me. That ass. "Well...." I started. Then stopped. I had a speech planned. What was it. Fuck. Improvisation. "Well. You see. Celestia's Paradise. Doesn't like. You. Or.... uh. Cyborgs...." I hated that term. Cyborg. It made me feel like I wasn't a real equine 'cause I got shot with a space bullet once. "And I am. You see. And Mr. House likes cyborgs. So...." I paused to blink. There was more. What was I going to say....

"Do you always let your hired help speak for you, Mr. High Stakes?" I flushed and looked intently at the ground. If she wanted me to be the dumb muscle, I might as well oblige.

"Sorry," he chuckled. "I wanted to see what she would say."

"You are not doing a good job of convincing me," Ahgna said plainly.

"The easiest answer is that Mr. House has reasons for wanting to give Celestia's Vision as much trouble as possible. They often harass his customers, and it would be just good business if they had as much trouble here as possible." The elderly Zebra seemed to accept that, if tentatively.

"And the filly?"

"Hired Gun's technician."

The zebra licked her cracked lips and nodded. Then nodded again. "Yes. Come in then. I warn you, if any of my zebra's die in 'freak' accidents, you'll go with." So she obviously didn't believe our story. Or was wary enough of ponies' treacherous ways to make sure we understood.

Ahgna nodded to Zahini who trotted over to the gate. Ever so slowly it slid open, just enough to let three of us in.

Karkhoof was eerily quiet. We walked down the main path with rows of cabins circling inward to the main building. When I looked over to one of the fake-log houses, I thought I saw a trio of striped faces. But as soon as they realized I was looking, they ducked away and curtains slammed shut. Turning my head the other direction I just caught sight of a door slamming in my face. Apparently, ponies weren't popular here. Considering the mob outside, I couldn't really blame them.

"If you really want to help, you can take a sniper position. Zahini show them." The stallion (or male zebra. I really needed to learn these terms) nodded respectfully and followed along. "Do not talk to zebras." Ahgna said. It wasn't a threat, but more of a warning. "They may warm up to you, may not. They might just kill you." That was a nice thought I suppose.

We stopped in front of the double doors to the large three story log building. “Follow Zahini. I have things to attend to....” She paused for a second struggling with her words. “If you are sincere, thank you....” There was a sense of honesty in her dark grey eyes that made my insides squirm. I wasn't being sincere, not by far. It made me almost feel like I was betraying this pony... zebra I hardly knew.

I was. But not for the reasons she expected.

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The entrance to the main room seemed fairly nice. The wooden interior (or at least fake wood, wasn't so sure on the matter) seemed relatively clean, and on the floor was an intricately-designed rug. To my right upon entering, was a long bar-like desk that I had to assume was where ponies checked in. We were led down a small corridor that immediately ended in stairs. Not much else to comment on, except that on the walls were woven murals of scenes I didn't recognize.

“*And that means it is time for the news!*” There was a few seconds pause because Mr. New Haygas laughed. “*Just kidding. We have a brand new song from 'The Traveller'. Enjoy kiddos.*” Zahini led us slowly up through the building before bringing us to a cramped room on the third floor. The only noticeable feature was a window pointing outwards towards the camp of crazy ponies outside Karkhoof. From the third floor I was high enough to see over the wall, but not so high I was going to have a panic attack anytime soon.

“Watch for trouble,” the zebra said coldly. “Don't shoot first.” A song started playing over my pipbuck's radio. It was a new song alright, and featured the sun as it's primary source of inspiration.

“You hate me.” I wasn't sure if that was a statement, question, or something far stupider. But for whatever reason my remarkably slow brain decided that was the thing to say.

“Yes,” the zebra said simply, as the song continued. Yes, it was about the sun, but not about its light. The Traveller sung of how beautiful the sun was, and how deadly. “I hate ponies.”

“All ponies? What about those you were with at the stable?”

“They --” He paused for a second. “Yes. I hated them. When zebras receive their glyph mark, the elder lets them leave. Explore the pony world. I left longer than most, but like everyone else I returned to Karkhoof.”

“I....” Didn't bother asking why he hated us. The mob outside seemed like a fair enough reasons. Not that they were exactly representative of ponykind as a whole, but if all you've ever known is angry mobs, it's hard not to understand. Me? I didn't hate Zahini. He hasn't really done enough to deserve it yet. I disliked him, sure, but I disliked just about everypony I met. Everyone I met.

Without another word, Zahini turned and walked away. I stared at his flank as he left. No not his flank, I meant his cutie mark.... Glyph mark.... Thing. It was not like a pony's. It was like a swirling black vortex with symbols and meaning. Or.... I wasn't sure. Sometimes I try too hard to make things meaningful. As he finally vanished from view, The Traveller sung about how the sun was back, and this was great and horrible. About how every silver lining is often accompanied with a horrible black cloud.

The Traveller was not the most optimistic pony.

“High Stakes.” I turned to the pale green pony. “Wait in the hall.” He blinked for a second but nodded his approval. A few seconds later there was only me and Serenity in the small cramped room.

My stomach twisted at the thought of what I was about to do.

But I had to do it. I had to show her that I wasn't a good mother. I wasn't who she should be looking up to. Maybe she wasn't as innocent as I liked to believe, but she was still naive.

“Serenity.” My tone was too harsh. I knew. But I had to keep a stern face. If I was to do this thing, I had to do it right. “Here.” I pulled over a stack of boxes and set them in front of the window. She tilted her head at me, but jumped up anyway. “Watch.”

I scanned the area. The court yard of Karkhoof was still deathly silent. A few zebras had left their houses, but they seemed to creep along quietly, trying not to be noticed. Out in the camp, I could see ponies surrounding campfires, and they seemed to smiling and laughing heartily. Off at the edge of the camp I could see Dragonslayer watching me. Or.... I wasn't really sure if he saw me, but he was looking in my direction. He wasn't with the camp, more like looking over it from a distance.

“I'm not a good pony.” Serenity moved to speak but I cut her off. “I'm not. Let me finish.” My eyes found what I was looking for. The caravan I was with before had finally arrived, and it's leader was sitting by a fire being served soup by an excited looking colt. “I do bad things.” The scope of Subtlety snapped over my eye.

“For example.” I zoomed in on the black mare. I never did learn her name. “I am going to kill a random pony. To start a war. She may be a good pony for all I know. But I am going to kill her. For money.”

“Don't do this, Mommy....” I didn't look at her. I knew what she was going to look like already. I.... I didn't want to do what I was about to do, but I had to. I had to show her who her mommy really was. “You don't....”

“I do have to. I took a job.” Take the job, kill the pony. I was just an assassin. One step up from a raider. Nanny Jane, Roy Mustang, this leader of the caravan. I killed them all. I killed them all, and they all never saw me coming. Maybe this made me evil, but whatever it made me, Serenity needed to see. Or else maybe she'd try to be like me, and I couldn't take that risk. Saving a pony's life tends to colour their view of you, you know?

“I'm sorry, Serenity. I can't be the pony you want me to be.” She never wanted me to be her mother. She wanted her mother to be me. There's a difference in that, I think.

I bit the bridle.

“NO!” Serenity screamed. A sudden weight on the barrel of Subtlety sent it lurching to the side.

Subtlety fired.

A streak of red flew through the air and hit it's mark. The serving colt.

My heart stopped. Seconds turned to minutes. The bullet slammed through the colt's leg as he walked over to give soup to my intended target. He fell. The bowl spun through the air as a spark flashed. A second later, the colt was engulfed in flames.

Tears stung my eyes as I watched him writhe. He slammed into a tent, and soon that was on fire too. It was too far away, but I thought I could hear him scream. I yearned to hear him scream, but when I strained my ears all I could hear was the wind whispering to me.

*I never wanted this... for either of us....*

Serenity ran off. I don't know where, I couldn't tear my eyes away the burning colt. Long after he died, I watched. As the camp surrounded his smouldering body I watched. When the faint stench of cooked flesh filled my nostrils, I watched. Even as the camp surged around the boy, and the first ponies charged the gate into Karkhoof. Even as the war I started with a bullet began in earnest, as gunfire flared between Celestia's Vision's and the Zebras, I kept on watching.

Maybe if I stopped watching the burning colt, I would have seen it in time to dodge. I tore my eyes away just in time to see Dragonslayer fire. I heard his bullet zip through the air. There was a crack in

the windowsill.

Then my world became pain. I hit the floor and gasped, my hooves grasping at my face. Dragonslayer shot me! Why? I was his client. Who was he working for? Why did he want to start a war? Why did he shoot me? None of these things matter compared to the pain surging through me. The pain twisted my stomach, and I puked.

Blood dripped into the vomit from the gory hole where there was once my right eye.

Footnote: Level Up!

Quest Perk: Hard Hearted: You know what you have to do, even when it's something you don't want to do. You've learned to push everything down, lock it away, and focus. Your focus is incredible... at the expense of your situational awareness. +20% to accuracy, but an extra 20% damage taken from sneak attacks.

Stat Milestone: Explosives 50

((A/N: First I need to give my thanks to kkat for creating this world I have lovingly defiled. Secondly, as always, I need to give my editors props for the hard work and effort they put into making my story not terrible. So if you see theBSDude, Julep, or ErrantIndy hanging around, make sure to buy them their drink of preference. Because I like long footnotes I also need to thank Fallout Equestria Resource and the owner Arcane Scroll for putting so much work into organizing the FO:E Fandom, as well as the Sidefic protodoc people for being so helpful and encouraging, except for Dina))

## Chapter 13: Event Horizon

*"You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears."*

"Dear Princess Celestia,

"I fucked up." I'm not sure why I spoke. Maybe it was to drown out the screaming outside, or maybe it was to keep myself thinking and awake. The pain raged through my skull worse than anything I had experienced before. Half my vision was a black and red blur. "I don't know what I was thinking."

With all my strength, I got myself to my feet, leaning heavily on the wall. Blood poured from my eye, dripping onto the floor like macabre tears. "I was trying to show her, show her why I was a terrible mother." I reached back but had to stop to gasp, closing my one eye tight. Fuck, it hurt so much. But I didn't allow myself to fall. I had to keep fighting. "I guess I did that." That at least happened the way I wanted. Everything else, well, I guess you could call it temporary insanity. Or me being me.

I never should have trusted somepony named Dragonslayer. I never should have taken the job. I never should have taken the shot. I never should have set that colt on fire. In my mind, he was still burning. I doubted he'd ever go out. "So I murdered a child. To teach another a lesson. Then I killed a village. More than a village."

I reached back and opened up my saddle bags. Sitting on top of the assortment of junk was a vial of med-x. You know, I wasn't sure where I bought it from, but there it was. Always waiting for me when I needed it. And I seemed to need it a lot. "Are you even up there, Celestia?" I doubted it. Part of me still had that foal-like belief she was watching over us, but I found it hard to believe. "Can you see me?"

I jammed the vial into my back.

The pain faded, but it didn't leave me completely. How could it? I lost my eye. Still, it was enough to keep me upright. "Do you hate me, Celestia? You should. I'm not a very good pony." I took a few steps, as Subtlety shifted uncomfortably on my back. "I killed that colt. I saw him burn, so you should hate me. Can a goddess hate?" That's a stupid question. Of course they couldn't.

I stepped out of the room. Was the hallway always so long? I took a few more steps, my knees shaking. Dammit, I took the vial; I shouldn't be hurt. I should be strong. I knew I only had a single vial left, I don't know how I knew, but I knew. "For what it's worth, Celestia, I'm sorry."

I stumbled into the nearest wall with a thud. Was the room spinning? Rooms shouldn't spin. So much spinning. Across the hall I thought I could see Wildfire smiling at me. She wasn't real, but I saw her. I blinked, and she was gone, but I could hear the voice in my ears. *You're working yourself too hard... take a break.*

No. No breaks. Ponies were dying because of me. Because I make stupid choices. I took a job to start a war, but I always took a job to end one if it started. That mattered too. "I'll try harder. I'm sorry. I've learned something important." My leg collapsed bringing me to a knee. It shouldn't hurt so much. I was only shot once. Only once. "I learned..."

There was a figure in front of me. I could barely see. "Celestia?"

"What?" The voice. I knew that voice. "You're delusion-- Celestia's Ghost, what happened to your eye?!" High Stakes. That was it. "C'mon, there's a battle out there. If you fight, you'll die. We need to get you to safety."

"No." I shook my head, sending spikes of flame into my brain. "Med-X. In my bag. Healing potion.

And..." And what? What was I going to say? "Ammo. Change it." With my half-vision I could see him wince back, a look of confusion on his face. "I have a job. To do. Find Serenity, keep her safe."

"You're going to risk your life for zebras?" Zebras I brought into this. Zebras I killed. Yes. Of course. I had a contract... and. And I had to prove to myself, and to Celestia, that I wasn't a lost cause. "You're insane." Behind him, I could see Wildfire smiling at me. Of course I was insane. How could I be anything else? Ever since the orb, maybe before.

"Do it." He gave me the potions and a few seconds later, the Med-X was flowing through me, and I could feel my eye stitching itself back together. Sort of. My sight didn't return though, and the look on High Stakes' face was enough for me to realize it was a lost cause. "Thank you," I grumbled, my mind clearer, and the visions gone.

"I'll find your daughter." Was he mocking me, or being earnest? Being around Flare so long, I couldn't even tell the difference. I wished Flare was there. He always knew how to lighten the mood, even if at the expense of my pride. "First." With a delicate magical touch he tore off a piece of the tapestry hanging on the hallway wall and quickly fashioned me an eye-bandage-patch-ugly-thingy. "Keep it clean. Maybe if we can find a pony with medical skill, it can be salvaged. If not, then at least you will be free from infections."

"Thanks," I said again, and stormed my way down the hallway.

Upon reaching the stairs I half ran, half slid down them. I was three stories up, and I needed to get to ground as fast as equinely possible. I couldn't risk not being as fast as possible. I don't know how, but I was going to stop this massacre. This battle. This battle I started.

Just as I got to the bottom step the door burst open. How long had it been since they started fighting? How had they gotten so far so fast? The pony that broke the door down was a bulky stallion in mercenary armour. Two more followed after him. Why were semi-religious protestors so well armed? It didn't make sense.

Subtlety fired.

I managed to take two of them down in three consecutive shots. The third, a mare with red hair, darted off to my right, into my blind spot. Grunting in annoyance, I slid into cover behind large desk. Bullets pierced through it in a flurry of splinters as easy as a fish through water, but since she couldn't see where I was, every shot missed. Cover didn't necessarily mean protection, but it could still save your life.

The burst of fire stopped, and I could have sworn I heard the sound of a gun reloading. No time to lose. I jumped up, slamming my forelegs onto the table for stability. I must have accidentally hit a button on my pipbuck as suddenly everything whooshed.

The sounds of the battle were gone. Everything seemed so deathly still. I could see the red maned mare in front of me in perfect detail. Suddenly I was staring at... words? Amber words seemed to fill my vision. "Welcome To SATS: Stable..." I started to read, only to find to my frustration I was unable to move my lips when I read. That made things difficult. Okay. Needed to get out of the twilight sparkle zone and....

"Skip?" I said, reading an amber word near the bottom of my mind-text. Suddenly the message vanished, leaving me still very still. The mare across the room was highlighted in an eerier amber glow, and for some reason her head's glowing highlight thingy was thicker. Beside it was more glowing words. 95... and then some sort of mathy symbol I didn't recognize.

Sure, that sounded good. I guess. Off to the side, I saw a flash of words and then suddenly I was back

in reality.

Subtlety fired without me even realizing. The mare's head became a red smear on the wall, and all over the room really. It was a little disappointing to see the majestic and aged carpet on the floor splattered and destroyed because of me. Of course, it'd be more disappointing if I didn't get out there and stop the fighting.

I ran through the door of the building (trying to forget my strange time standing still adventure) and into hell. Somehow the camp had caught fire almost completely, and all the ponies from it were flooding into Karkhoof like a stampede. Bloody battles seemed to be taking place in every house, but I'd no idea who was winning.

Celestia's Vision seemed to have split into various smaller, and torch-bearing, mobs. Each was headed by two ponies in heavy mercenary-style armour. The groups fanned out across the town, picking houses at random and setting fire to them, and killing any zebra that got too close. You would think this was a clear indication of who was winning, but....

A single Zebra burst out of the remains of a house, blood drenching his face. One of the mercenaries sent out a blisteringly fast burst from his automatic rifles, only to hit nothing but air. In all my life, I'd never seen anyone move so fast. The Zebra ducked and weaved, not a single bullet hitting him, and slammed his forelegs into the pony's head. It snapped backward with a sickening crunch. The pony fell, and the Zebra went to work on the rest of the mob. Why didn't they just do that in the first place!

"Strange." I turned to see Zahini standing beside me, his face grim. "You show up, and suddenly everything goes to hell. Is there some sort of secret you do not wish to tell?" Wait, was he talking in rhyme? This really wasn't the time. "I should kill you."

"Please don't." I grunted, a numb pain washing through me. "Trying to save you." I ignored him; there really wasn't time to talk. Instead, I charged a nearby mob of twenty ponies.

The mercenary directing the group tilted her head at me as I charged. I could see confusion in her eyes. I guess in her mind there was no way a pony would be rushing to defend Zebras. Maybe that was true, but she hadn't taken into account just how colossally stupid I could be. The mare got off a single shot from her pistol before I rammed her. Sticking my head between her forelegs, I lifted her up with my neck and then sent her soaring through the air.

The second mercenary in the group turned to me, firing off a shot that embedded itself into my barding. Subtlety was faster than he was, as it took off his head at the neck before he could fire a second shot. Gore splattered the mob, and I saw their collective eyes go wide. Just like that, they scattered, most running for other small groups or back towards burning camp.

"Good. Run." In the part of my vision obscured by the eye-patch, I saw a splash of red. Wildfire was there in my blinded vision shaking her head at me. "Go away." I said to her. "You're dead." She didn't, so I ignored her and charged off. If I could, I would find Righteous Song, the leader of Celestia's Vision, and use her to stop this madness. This madness I caused.

Serenity would never forgive me for this, that much I was sure, but I wasn't even sure if I could forgive myself anymore. The smell of smoke and fire burned my nostrils, but beyond it I could sense the stench of death, just beneath the surface. It was something I'd tasted before, but somehow it tasted all the worse because I was the cause of it.

Fuck, depressing thoughts. Go away, I'd ponies to save.

I took two steps when it hit me. That was, a something cracked my skull and sent me stumbling. Fuck my ability to see right! I turned and aimed Subtlety to see a striped muzzle glaring at me. Magical time

stopping powers activate! Nothing. Fuck. "Wait!" The zebra ignored my call and charged me. Her hoof blow was deflected off my metal leg. "Stop it!" She turned and bucked. My neck snapped back, just dodging her hooves. Damn, she was fast. "I said." I said as I ducked a hoof strike. "Let me!" I caught her hoof with my metal leg. "Speak!" With all my strength, I threw her into the ground. I watched her skid across the ground before saying. "Okay?"

The mare slowly got to her feet but said nothing. Unfortunately, she also didn't stay long enough to let me speak my piece and instead ran off into the din of war to find an easier target to fight. Fuck this was...

BANG BANG BANG

Shit.

Bullets slammed into my legs, and chest and sent me stumbling to a knee. That's okay; I wanted to lose more blood anyway. I gritted my teeth and looked up to see one of the mercenary ponies pointing a rifle at my head. My shoulder burned as the aura around the rifle glowed.

Looking up at the barrel of the gun, I gave a grim smile. Just pull the trigger. End it. I started this battle, it was only fitting I died during it. Do it.

"DO IT!"

The pony behind the gun balked. Startled by my words. Good, I didn't want to die anyway. I batted the rifle away with my pipbuck, stumbled to my feet and blew his face off. He should have killed me. It would have been more just. But since when did the Wasteland care about justice?

I shook the thoughts out of my mind. Screams of pain came from all around. Dammit, it smelled so bad. Why did I have to do this?. I closed my eye, but all I could see was the colt burning and Wildfire's disappointed green eyes. I wasn't sure what was worse.

It didn't matter. I had to stop this. Somehow. All around me was chaos, how was I supposed to....

There was a scream.

It sounded like Serenity. I took off in the direction of the scream. A mob of ponies were in my way, so I crashed into them. And trust me, when I crashed into ponies they got the fuck out of the way or got crushed. It didn't matter to me which. That scream was imbedded in my mind, and that's all I could focus on. Was it strange I orchestrated this whole thing to make Serenity hate me but still charged in when I thought she was in danger?

In the end, it wasn't even Serenity. Instead, when I got my way through the crowd of murderous pastel ponies, I found a white pony with a long blond mane standing over. Something. "Not the children," She said. "I told you all-"

"They killed Post Haste!" Somepony in the mob spoke, but it could have been any one. "Why should we hold bac-"

"Silence." It was then I realized I'd found Righteous Song... and she was protecting a zebra child from harm. "Are we not better than they? You are comparing our actions to savages, so does that not make you too a savage?" The crowd quieted. "This was to be a last resort, but if we cannot stop the murder of children how can we presume to be in the right?" The mare stood, her hair blowing in the wind. "Call the Steel Hooves; tell them to retreat. We have taught the Zebras a lesson today, but we cannot continue killing foals."

The mob stopped but did not do what was asked.

"NOW!" she screamed, and the mob scattered.

She stood protectively over the striped form. She was here to kick these Zebras out of their homes; why did she care? Her eyes snapped to me. “Who are you? I don't recognize you. What do you want?”

“You're a mother, aren't you?” I guessed. Her features softened just a little bit. I wasn't sure how I knew. It was just the way she was standing over that foal protecting him. I'd seen it before.

“You look injured, I will have the medics look after you.” She turned away. All around, the ponies were fleeing, but the Zebras didn't follow. It seemed that after the ponies they were fighting turned to run, the Zebras refused to follow. It didn't make much sense. “We need to leave, now.”

I didn't, instead I turned my eyes to the sky. I heard it before I saw it peak over the horizon. A huge black vehicle flying through the sky. A Vertibuck. I'd seen them before around Dise, but why would they be here. It made no sense. Until I realized I had told Flare to meet us here.

Well, at least he came in style.

Of course, my Med-X had to wear off then. Even as Righteous Song fled, I fell and faceplanted into the muddy dirt. Yum, dirt. I closed my eye and let myself drift into pain-fueled unconsciousness. I was not looking forward to the nightmares.

---

“O-once. Up on. A Time.” I took a deep breath and closed my eyes to give them rest. Not too long though, because I could feel Wildfire's stern gaze. Opening them back up, I looked down at the book and the row after row of squiggly writing. How could anypony look at this and understand? It wasn't that hard to find my spot though... I was still on the first line. “In the... mag...” I scrunched up my muzzle at the word, and tried to sound it out. “Ma-gick-a-clay”

“Magical, hon.” Wildfire's voice was soft, yet I for some reason I still felt a fool for not getting it.

“Magical,” I said a again, and tried to continue. “Land of...” What the hell was that. Words should not be that long. It was... argh. “E-que...rest...” I blinked and rubbed my eyes with my hoof. I could do this. They were just stupid words! Everypony else could read, so dammit I would too! Even if it killed me.

I looked down at the troublesome word. Yep, definitely kill me...

“Eck...west...try....eh?” I winced at what even I knew was a mangling of the word. I peeked over to Wildfire standing beside me. Turns out she was just as beautiful as the last time I looked, only her green eyes seemed sad. No, that was not the right word. Her eyes looked to be pitying me. If there was a clearer indication I got the word wrong, I didn't know.

“Silver...” I winced at her tone, “where do we live?”

I looked down at the word again. “That word doesn't look like 'Marefort'.”

She chuckled softly. “No hon, try again.” Try again? I stared at her blankly. We did live in Marefort. What else could she be saying? “Equestria.”

“Oh!” I perked up and went back to the word. Now that she mentioned it, it did look a lot like Equestria. Argh, I wasn't a smart pony. Reading should be left for eggheads. Not that Wildfire would let me stop; she had ways of making me do what she wanted. Okay, next part. “Equestria, there we are two re... regl... regarl... reg...”

Fuck it! I kicked the book up and sent it flying through the air and into a wall. I looked around and glared at everything. Our house used to belong to Wildfire's father, and like most houses in Marefort it only had a single room. Ours, however, came equipped with two beds and a single table in the centre of the room. So it was a little bit cramped.

“Silver!” I winced and brought my glare to Wildfire's green eyes. Okay, I could do this. Just keep glaring. Keep. I couldn't hold up the facade and look at Wildfire too, so my expression softened and I looked away. Damn her. “You are the one who wanted to learn.”

“That was before I realized how difficult it is...” I grumbled. It was difficult. I don't know how ponies thought it was so easy. Most of those squiggly letter things looked exactly alike. In my annoyance, I kicked the nearest thing, and that was the skinny mattress on the floor that served as our bed. It wasn't really big enough though...

“Well...” She trotted around me to make sure I was looking at her. “If you want to read to Foundation, you need to learn to read.” I winced at that. Ever since we found Foundation in the ruins of her home, and started living together to take care of her, Wildfire had taken to reading a bedtime story to her every night. After a month or so, I got a little jealous. So Wildfire agreed to teach me. I was regretting my rashness a little bit, but it would be worth it if I could read Foundation that story.

“Argh.” I sat down on our mattress bed thing. “I need a break.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, her muzzle was way too close to mine. I could feel her warm breath on my neck sending a tingling sensation down my spine. “Well, hon, I know how to make you relax.”

“Stop it.” Was I blushing? Argh, I knew she did this just to make me flustered. “I don't swing that way...”

“You did last night.” I squeaked and felt myself get an even deeper shade of red. Which should have been impossible.

“I...” I flattened my ears, and looked away. “That's... it's.” I didn't like mares! Really. It was only Wildfire; she was different. Something about the way her mane flowed down her neck, or that smile she gave when she was thinking of being mischievous. It wasn't fair! “What if somepony sees us?”

“They'll pretend they didn't and walk away...” she said with a fluttering of eyelashes. I know she didn't want anything, she was just trying to get me going. “C'mon, it won't be long.” She was so good at getting me going...

It was really hard to say no. I don't know why I didn't want to be thought of as a fillyfooler, but to me it just felt weird. Maybe because I wasn't one... except when Wildfire got so close and I felt warm... warm in so many places. I opened my mouth to protest.

And she kissed me.

All thoughts of abstaining vanished in my head as I touched her lips and melted into the kiss. She always tasted of raspberries, and her kisses couldn't have been sweeter. If I had it my way I would have stayed there until I grew old, and let her kiss me until we both died. It would have been a good life.

“Oh.” I opened my eyes to see a charcoal grey filly staring at us from the door, her ruby red eyes (Poetic, no?) staring up at us in confusion. “Sorry. I didn't mean to... I'll just.” She looked away and squeaked a bit, trying to hide behind her long pale-green mane (which reminded me that she needed it cut. It was so long it was reaching the floor and was a frazzled mess overall).

“It's fine,” Wildfire said, giving me the cue to scramble away. “Have you been playing with the other kids?” Her tone was hopeful, but that hope was smashed when the filly shook her head. Foundation liked to go out and watch the other foals play, but if they asked her if she wanted to join, she usually shook her head and looked away. Some of the other parents (is it strange I just thought of myself as a parent... I didn't feel like one, but there wasn't really another word to use) came to us, worried she was a mute. It was a bit shocking actually, as she had never been afraid to talk to us, but with anypony else she seemed too timid to talk.

Not that I could blame her, after what she went through.

“Sorry,” she said meekly, stepping slowly into our house. She always seemed too wary, afraid the floor was going to give way, sending her plunging down the levels of Marefort. With a slight smirk, I picked the brush off the table, reached over and hooked Foundation with my foreleg, and pulled her over to my bed. Sitting her down beside me, I started brushing the tangles out of her hair. For a filly that apparently didn't play, she had the messiest mane I'd ever seen.

“What did you do then?” Wildfire said as she trotted across the room to sit opposite us on Foundation's bed.

“Mari-” She squeaked, as I tugged a bit too hard at an aggressively tangled knot. “Marigold. She wanted you. She, um, said...” The filly looked pleadingly up at me, but I shook my head. Her hair was getting untangled, and that was the end of it. “She said Smooth Tongue. Said he agreed.”

I raised an eyebrow over to Wildfire, who looked contemplative. I tried to stay uninvolved in the politics of the town, but I knew the name Smooth Tongue well enough. How could I not know the name of our tyrant raider leader? “Agreed to what?”

“Independence,” Wildfire said softly. “We have been trying to... disassociate ourselves with the Crimson Hoof for a while. So Mayor Mare, Marigold, Nos, and I proposed a plan. A deal...” She looked at me with a smirk, “You wouldn't understand the specifics, but it seems he's... well he's let us become independent. Just trust me, it's a good thing.” I nodded at that and continued to brush Foundation's hair. I didn't understand politics, trade, or negotiations, but I did know Smooth Tongue and hated him for what happened to my mother. Any chance to get as far away from him was a good thing in my eyes.

*Everything you love is going to die.*

My eyes darted around. I could have sworn I heard something.

*Don't love, it hurts too much.*

There it was again! Foundation and Wildfire both seemed not to notice but I could have sworn.

*Let them go, it'll be easier...*

I realized that I recognized the voice.

*Survive.*

The voice was mine.

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My eyes fluttered open.

Sorry, that should have been “eye”. My left one, as my right seemed to still be wrapped in that makeshift eye patch. With a groan, I started to look around the room but didn't really see much -- until a pony caught my attention. A skinny pegasus buck in pitch black armour was staring at me from across the room. His helmet showed none of his features and came equipped with creepy bug-like eyes. Behind him, I saw his tail swinging back and forth, looking more like a radscorpion's tail than a ponies. Carved into the armour's flank was a picture of a cloud and lightning bolt.

“Like it?” What, me? Wait a second, I knew that voice. “Been a hell of a long time since I wore it. Was my grandpappy's back when he fled the skies, and it passed down to me once I came of age.” Wait a second. My eyes shot to a the pair of Grenade launchers sitting in the corner of the room. “What happened to your eye, anyway? Wait, wait, don't tell me. Someone tried to shoot your brains and missed?”

“Flare?”

The stallion laughed, reared up on his hind legs, and paused there as if waiting for me to take a mental picture. Yup, it had to be Flare. “Took you long enough to figure out. Can't say I'm that surprised. It is I, Flare. You did tell me to meet you here after I lost Curly Fries and the metal flank brigade.”

Something wasn't meshing with my remembering of events though. He must have brought the Vertibuck, but as far as I knew he wasn't back with the Enclave yet. Back in Dise, he had said he'd be able to join in about a week... which was about how long it had been. Huh. But then if he joined back with the Remnants, why even come back to us at all. And why would he bring that flying... thingy.

“So...”

“I suppose you should know the Remnants were hired by House to bring you back once you finish his task...” I knew Flare well enough to know he was smirking at me, “Considering what I saw outside, I am guessing we're just about done here. Didn't take you long at all did it?” No. It didn't. Apparently starting a war was as easy as shooting a kid. *Post Haste*, I reminded myself. It was important to remember his name.

“What happened...” my throat felt scratchy.

“Funny. I was about to ask you the same thing...” he whipped his scorpion tail back and forth. “Not that you ever know. From what I hear, *somehow* both sides say the other shot first. There was fighting until Celestia's Vision retreated. Then, according to Aghna, the Steel Hoof mercenary company broke its contract with Righteous Song forcing her to take her cult back to Dise or risk being slaughtered in the inevitable Zebra counter attack. Congratulations, whatever you did got the two sides to leave each other alone.” At the price of how many lives? I didn't feel all that victorious. “Cheer up, mopey. They were going to fight no matter what. All you did was make'em fight sooner.”

Maybe that was true, but I couldn't get the memory of Post Haste burning. Even if the two sides did fight, without me here Post Haste wouldn't have burned.

“Great, I make my triumphant return to find my travelling buddies are depressed.” He shook his head, and used his forehooves to pry off his helmet. Yup, it was definitely Flare under that armour. I think he looked more badass without the helmet on, because it made me realize it was in fact Flare I was talking to. And the contrast from what Flare was like when I met him and what he was like now was so strong it was hard not to be wowed.

“Serenity...” Right. Last time I saw her, she watched me murder a colt. Fuck. She was going to hate me... I know that's what I wanted! It didn't make me feel any better about it though! She needed to hate me so she could learn how not to act, but, still, it hurt.

“Last time I saw her, she was sitting in a corner replacing Scootaborg's tail with wires.” Right, not creepy at all. I rolled off the bed (oh, I was lying in a bed, I guess that was important) and moved to the door. “Really? You're leaving. And here I thought you missed me. Such a shame. Shouldn't you, like, ask about what happened? Or! How about where you are? These are important things.”

Shut up, Serenity was more important.

Besides, looking around the room I could see it was the centre building in Karkhoof. This obviously meant there had been enough survivors that they could afford to give me medical attention, and that they believed I was on their side because of my actions during the battle. Meaning they were stupid for not realizing what I did.

“C'mon.” Flare gave a weary sigh, and followed me into the hallway. Apparently I was getting smarter, because as soon as I entered, I could tell what floor I was on. You see, one of the tapestries hanging on

the wall was ripped, meaning it was probably the tapestry used to make my eye patch, meaning I was on the third floor. Across the hall, I could see a small zebra stare at me with shock before quickly scurrying out of view.

We didn't make it two steps before High Stakes appeared out of a side room. Wait, was he smiling at me? That couldn't be right. "I see you got her to wake up." Hey! Don't talk around me.

"She's a heavy sleeper," Flare said with a shrug. "Might have something to do with losing an eye, I hear that saps the energy right out of ya." Tell me about it. The fact half my vision was obscured didn't help anything at all. Fighting was going to be a pain in the flank.

"Mr. House will be glad to see you are up and running. Once you are done with... whatever it is you are doing, we should leave; it is not wise to keep him waiting." Why did it even matter? After he learned how I bungled this job, I wasn't going to get a job with him. "Though first, I should ask what you did when you kicked me out."

"Fuck off." I stormed past him, shoving him into a wall with my shoulder.

Behind me I could hear Flare say: "Don't mind her. She's surly in the mornings... and afternoon. Evenings as well, and it's best not to speak to her at night either." Argh, why did I miss Flare again? It certainly wasn't his wit. I hated his wit.

I got to the end of the hall when I realized I didn't actually know where Serenity was. I suppose that would have been a problem if I wasn't blessed the ability to burn around magic. Or. Something. Basically I could feel the tingling sensation in my shoulder that let me know magic was nearby (more specifically, Serenity's magic) and I followed it. Second door on the right, and there she was.

I found her sitting in the room from which I had shot Post Haste, sitting on the same boxes where I had made her watch. I wasn't even sure she was aware. She was just half leaning out the window staring at the setting sun while she brushed Scootaborg's tail (I should mention the tail had, in fact, been replaced by a series of thin wires). For a second I didn't think she heard me walk in.

"Why?" she asked, not turning around. Maybe she was afraid to see me. I couldn't blame her. Between my lack of ear, lack of eye, and lack of soul, I was not a pretty sight. "Why did you..." She choked up. It didn't take an egghead to realize she was crying. This was the sort of thing I was trying to avoid...

"I..." Didn't mean to shoot the child, is what I wanted to say. It felt hollow though. I was deluding myself if I thought the battle wasn't going to kill children. Maybe it was better if she saw me shoot him. Let her know who I really was. "I..." I couldn't think of anything to say. I did a horrible thing. I deserved to be hated. "I'm sorry."

"You're horrible."

I was.

"You're a monster."

I couldn't argue with that.

"I hate you."

You should.

"Go away."

I turned and walked away.

Mission accomplished. This is what I wanted wasn't it? I wanted her to hate me, to fear me, to think I was a monster. She had to see me as I truly was. How else was she going to stop idolizing me? How

else was she going to learn to be a better pony? But, if everything had gone according to plan. How come I couldn't stop crying?

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“Are you sure there is nothing else we can do for you?” Aghna, the zebra elder, said as she followed us out of the centre building. Serenity reluctantly came out as well, though she stayed as far away from me as possible.

“No... you've done enough.” I'd done enough. At least five of the homes in Karkhoof were nothing more than smoking rubble heaps, and three more of the ones I saw were burned badly enough to be unusable. The air stank of death and smoke, making it hard to breathe. In the centre of the town, the black veritbuck stayed parked, attended to by no less than five black-armoured pegasi. Throughout the town zebras zipped back and forth. Carrying corpses. Fixing up broken buildings. Moving wreckage. But the Zebras made sure not to get close to the pegasi, and the pegasi made sure to avoid the zebras.

“Are you sure?” The old zebra seemed honest, and almost eager. A long shot from the way she was when we first met. “I saw you out there. Were it not for you convincing that bitch to leave...” Did she really think that was what I'd done? She had made the choice on her own, all I did was watch. That wasn't even my plan, I was just going to shoot her until she got them to surrender.

“No...” Out of the corner of my good eye I saw two zebra's carrying a corpse away. “It was nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Are you sure you do not wish for a potion? They are zebra secrets, but for what you did... perhaps a bon-”

“NO!” I quickly clamped my mouth shut, and looked away. I shouldn't have yelled. I growled low as I could. “Sorry. I mean no. It has been a long day.” I looked up at the setting sun. A long day indeed. Had we really only been here for a single day? It felt like so much longer. “So many died today...”

The mare looked down, but nodded. “They shall be returned to their ancestors. We have lost many, but this is nothing new. We will survive. It is what we have always done.” She looked so very tired. “But if you must, please go on your way. Some of my clan do not much care for ponies... it is not hard to see why.” Not at all.

“We will go... sorry.”

“It is not your fault, child.” I tried to open my mouth to say something, but the words refused to come. So instead, I walked past her and towards the Vertibuck. Flare flapped ahead of me, and gave me something of a stern look under his helmet.

“Will You Be Okay To Fly?” Huh. Something about his voice sounded weird. I chalked it up to the helmet. “Because Last Time You Flew You Nearly Wet Yourself, And This Trip Will Be Long... You Should Go To The Bath-” I cut him off by pushing past and stepping into the flying machine. I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little bit nervous. And I may have been shaking. Just a little.

Inside the Vertibuck's seating area was a single pale yellow pegasus with a pure white mane, and two clouds for a cutie-mark. “Hired Gun, I presume,” he said in a strangely commanding voice. “I am Sky Fall, as Captain Flare has taken the duty of helping to fly us, I will be accompanying you back to Dise.”

“Wait... this thing is powered by pegasus?” The pegasus nodded once. “That seems... strange.”

“It is best not to question pre-war technology. Often, the answers you get merely raise more questions.” Right. Whatever. He must have seen me looking around nervously. “Do not fret, we are safe. This machine has never broken down on accident, and if it did, the pegasus powering it would be able to glide us safely to the ground.” Unless we were attacked. But who would attack us?

Well, the Steel Rangers for a start. Molly and her gang, if she survived that explosion (which she probably had if she had sent an assassin after me). Not to mention Granny Dynamite if she realized I went behind her back to kill Roy... well three factions wasn't so bad. I might be exaggerating my infamy a bit, anyway. But it made me feel good to think so many ponies wanted me dead, even if it wasn't entirely true.

“Right.” I took a seat as High Stakes and Serenity followed in behind. For reasons I could not explain High Stakes took the time to glare at Sky Fall before sitting as far away from him as possible. Serenity took a seat beside me, but kept just far enough away for me to know she didn't want me around. She didn't even look around, just sullenly sat there staring at Scootaborg.

So. This was going to be the most awkward flight in Remnant history.

Then the Vertibuck lurched beneath me. I felt the urge to vomit rise in my stomach. A few seconds later I could feel the machine start to speed up. We were flying. Fuck, we were flying. High up in the air. With nothing but a few pieces of metal, and the trust of a few unknown pegasi keeping me from falling a thousand feet. I hate flying.

So much.

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Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

“Stop being a wimp.” Serenity sneered. I did not like applying that action to Serenity, but it was unfortunately correct. She didn't even bother to look up at me when she said it; I think it made it easier for her.

“Your daughter seems upset, Miss Gun.” Sky Fall said after politely coughing in his hoof. No pony had talked since we left Karkhoof, and I could see he was eager to break the silence.

“She's not my mother.” I winced. Despite everything I thought I knew, I found that blow hurting more than any other I've taken since I left Bridle Hope. This made no sense! This is what I wanted. I wanted her to hate me, right? That's what this whole thing was about. I couldn't be her mother, I wasn't ready for that. Not again. So, what? Why did I feel so sorry for myself when she said I wasn't? Was I really so selfish I wanted her to think of me as her mother but without me having to think of her as a daughter? I'm even more horrible than I had anticipated.

“So. Miss Gun. Where are you from?” Sky Fall said. I noticed that unlike the three of us, he sat so still he could have been carved from stone.

“The North.”

“May I ask where?” He gave the slightest hint of a smile.

“No.” He stared blankly at me. Right. I guess talking to mysterious pegasi was better than silently contemplating every single way the vertibuck could break down sending me plummeting to my death.

“Who... are you?”

“Ah, I was wondering when you would ask. I am Colonel Sky Fall. Second-In-Command of the Grand Pegasus Enclave.”

“Remnants.” High Stakes countered. He seemed oddly scowly with Sky Fall. “Didn't you get the memo? The Grand Pegasus Enclave is losing. The sky has been cleared, the Light Bringer defeated their armies, and you and your little breakaway is next. You're little more than sixty year old rotting pus from a newly dead corpse that hasn't had the good manners to flush yourself down the drain. The wasteland would be better off if you laid down arms.” I may have been going out on a limb, but I am

guessing High Stakes didn't like Sky Fall.

“Do I know you?” Sky Fall didn't reacted to the verbal onslaught at all. It was actually creepy.

“No, but I know you.” Today was cryptic reply day. First pony to hit fifteen cryptic replies first wins! So far I was leading with four, but High Stakes was catching up quickly.

“Have I insulted you? Your family? Your... glasses?” As if on cue somehow his spectacles caught just enough light to shine ominously. High Stakes did not seem ready to answer the question, which was strangely out of character. Or in character. I'd no idea what his character was like. Whatever his character, was it was making my flight more awkward than I would have liked.

So, to make sure everypony is on the same page, the count was: One sulking filly, one statuesque pegasus, one cryptically pissed of unicorn, and one earth pony mare (who totally was not afraid of heights). Basically, it sucked. A lot. It didn't help that the trip seemed to be hours of us just staring blankly at each other.

I hated flying.

“So... You're a colonel.” It was up to me to save the trip. Sky Fall nodded with an enigmatic smile.

“Then. Why go on a random contract?”

“To see you, of course.” Great, that's what I wanted to hear. “You caused quite a stir, killing Roy, and I wanted to see what the fuss was about.” It didn't take an impressive specimen to shoot a pony. Though I suppose it did take guts to kill a pony like him. “And the Watchers seemed very excited about your... condition.” I raised an eyebrow. “The Starmetal of course.” Right of course. How could I forget. “It seems the Caledonian Military did extensive research on the material before the bombs fell. Very interesting stuff.” I'm sure. “Of course as a side effect, you'll find bits and pieces across the Dise Wasteland. Even a little scratch in the wrong area can kill a pony, yet you live. According to the Watchers it was a combination of dumb luck and quantity.” I wasn't so sure on the 'luck' part, but I'd 'dumb' going for me.

“So?”

“So I was curious. I am in a position of considerable authority, it is in my best interest to know the dangers I send my ponies out to face. Starmetal is not a huge danger, as it was a rare and costly thing, but it is dangerous enough to warrant care.” He smiled at me. His teeth were perfect and white. For some reason that made me hate him. Either that or I was just in a hatey mood.

“So I am. A specimen?” I honestly didn't see what the big deal was. Which is not a surprise I suppose.

“Yes.” Well, at least he was honest. “You are remarkably healthy for one who is dying.”

I was dying? I don't think I was. I didn't feel like I was dying. You'd think it'd be one of those things you'd know for sure.

“Dying?” Serenity asked, surprisingly soft. Even High Stakes had the courtesy to look shocked at this sudden proclamation.

“According to all research I have gathered Starmetal is al-”

“I'm not dying.” I cast my glare at him and met his eyes. He had green eyes, and I hated green eyes. They always made me feel uncomfortable. “I don't know your game. I'm not dying. Stop... looking at me like that. I don't know why you came. Doesn't matter. But I'm not your lab rat. And I'm not going to die. Not anytime soon. Whatever angle you're pulling, stop it.”

He didn't react but to give a sad smile.

Just then the Vertibuck slammed down into the something. My badass glare was cut off by a moment of panic as I thought we were crashing. We weren't. A few seconds later and the door lifted open revealing a black-clad pegasus.

“And we're here, hope it wasn't too boring.” The pegasus made a show of sniffing the inside of the vertibuck. “Smells good, so I assume Hired didn't find it too scary.” I had guessed it was Flare, and that confirmed it. What an ass.

I followed him out of the Vertibuck and onto the roof. Off the edges of the roof I could see hints of buildings, and streets far below. Off in the distance I could see the three barrel shaped buildings of the Ale House, and right across the street, rising high into the sky, was the huge tower that topped the Clips and Clops Casino. Even from where I stood, high above most of Dise, the pony head as the top of the tower looked ominous and imposing. How could anypony build something so high?

So here I was again. Dise. Hadn't I just escaped this damn city? So why was I back here again? This place took my hopes and dreams, chewed them up, and spit them out, and then pissed on them. It was a horrible, miserable city, made all the worse that it was one of the safest places in the wastes, and that if it were not for this stupid, fucking city I wouldn't have been holding 6000 caps in my saddle bags. I hated Dise, and it had made me rich. It seemed like all roads lead to Dise. So I had to get used to it.

“Molly, Granny Dynamite, Roy Mustang, Mayhem, Clean Cutt, Photo Finish, Elder Chunky Soup, Righteous Song, Sky Fall, and now Mr. House.” I turned to Flare, who had taken off his Enclave Helmet. “I've lived in this city since I was a foal and only met three of those, until I met you. For a pony that claims not to like talking, you sure do get around. What's your secret?”

“Alcohol.” I said dryly. “And being strong.” He raised an eyebrow. “Well. Way I see it. Ponies in charge think they're smart. Smart ponies in charge like to have dumb ponies to follow their orders. I make a good dumb muscle.”

“I'm sure Roy Mustang would agree.”

I tried out one of those enigmatic smirks that seemed so popular. “Exactly.”

“Did you really kill him? Forgive my disbelief, I have heard it said, and yet...” Ack! Who! I turned my head to see High Stakes standing beside me. Right. Half my vision was black. This was going to be hard to get used to. Could be worse I suppose. At least I had most of my limbs.

“She killed'em all right. Saw it myself too, it was a classy move. Though it would have been nice if some of us were in on the plan before you did it.” I turned my head to see Flare hanging upside down grinning at me. I would have smiled had Serenity not spoken up, her tone dark.

“Let's just go already.” A pink thing darted past us, and into the waiting darkness of the rest of the rooftop. Eventually we were going to have a talk, a real one, and my gut was already tearing itself apart in anticipation.

“Oh.” A voice behind me. Fuck all these ponies! I remembered a time when I actually got some peace and quiet to be over-emotional.

I turned to see Sky Fall waving at me as the Vertibuck started to ascend. “Take care of Captain Flare for me, and try not to die too soon.” I hate you. I hate you. I hate you. Also, it turns out I cannot, in fact, make ponies' heads explode with my thoughts.

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“Starscream. Right?”

The red buck with a royal blue mane smiled at me. “What gave it away?” He flapped his robotic wings

a little. "Is it because I'm an alicorn?" He wasn't, not really. I mean it was pretty cool that he was a unicorn that got augmented with wings, but that didn't make him an alicorn. They were something special. I'd met him once before, right after I killed Roy. We didn't have the chance to talk much, as I had to run for my life, but I knew he worked for Mr. House. Honestly, I was a bit surprised to find him here. "Ah, High Stakes, you have returned. Perhaps you've reconsidered Mr. House's offer?"

"Not likely. As much as I appreciate it, I prefer to keep my body as is." He shook his head. "And no, I am not listening to Celestia's Vision's swill, I merely want to keep my body my own." Starscream was obviously preparing a rebuttal before High Stakes cut him off. "Yes, I know it need not be anything big. A tail, an eye, or dermal armour -- I am not interested."

"Ah, well, it was worth a shot. Mr. House is very interested in your considerable talent." He turned back to me. "And yours. Though it seems you hit a rough patch, since we last spoke. You seem to have lost an eye." I gave a weak smile. "Your cybernetics are more than enough to be admitted as a Hizai, but we can arrange a new eye for you as well. If House agrees, and if you agree to his proposal."

"What?" Flare smirked. "Don't we get to talk about it at all? Discuss? Seems like the thing to do. I'm well versed in bart--"

"Captain Flare, right? You're lucky House is allowing an Enclave rat like you in his presence. He may employ your service, but he knows who you and your kin really are." He said it so sweetly, I almost forgot just what he was saying. It was a rare talent indeed. "But I can assure you there will be no bargaining. House will tell you what the deal will be, and you will accept or not. He does not negotiate; if he is feeling generous he will allow time to think." The cybernetic alicorn kept on smiling. "Also, I should be clear any deal he makes will be for you, Hired Gun, not your companions, and especially not the Enclave rat."

"Can we go in? It's cold." I suppose I should have mentioned that we were still standing on the roof, right in front of the entrance to The Black Salamander Hotel Casino And Whateverelse. It seemed that ever since the clouds had fled, the nights had been getting cooler. I blamed magic.

"Oh," Starscream said from the open doorway. "Right this way." It was at that moment I realized I was leading Serenity into what could only be considered Cybernetic heaven, and she didn't react. She just stared at the floor. It was... kind of depressing. Like everything else that happened today. I was sensing a pattern.

The Casino, hospital, thing. From now on I am calling it the BS, because it lacks a pithy name. Anyway, the BS was fairly clean and very well lit. The other casinos I'd been in were lit well enough so that I could see, but it seemed Mr. House was obsessed with keeping every light on at all times. I could only imagine it was just another dick-waving manoeuvre: same as why he only fully employed cyborgs.

The actual style of the BS left much to be desired. It wasn't bad, but it didn't give me anything to latch onto. The Moon left me feeling dark and dirty (as was intended), and The Alehouse looked like a mix of class and debauchery, while the Clips and Clops made me want to eat a lot of cake. But as I walked through the halls of the BS, I didn't get any impression at all. Maybe that was on purpose. It just felt so bland, and sterile.

Evidently, I should have gotten a cutie mark in interior decorating, the way I was analyzing the hotel.

Starscream eventually led us to what could only be Mr. House's meeting chamber (I made sure to put on my shades before entering. It's always good to make an impression). It had to be, because it was a huge semi-circular room with giant windows that faced Dise covering the entirety of a section of wall. Directly in front of an array of computer terminals was by a giant monitor that looked to be ten times

larger than was necessary. The rest of the room, however, seemed pretty fancy as well. Expensive looking couches, lamps, and what looked like a door on the right side that lead to a personal bedroom. Though that was only a guess. In terms of extravagance, it was slightly below Roy's huge penthouse suite, but above the offices of the other gang leaders I met.

*"hello,"* The computer said.

Wait a second. I stepped forward and let my companions file in behind me (if you are keeping track: Starscream was standing by the door, High Stakes to my left, Flare to my right, and Serenity far behind me glumly looking at Scootaborg [could Scootaborg become a Hizai?], not saying much) and watched the computer screen.

On it was the picture of a classy looking stallion with a pencil moustache. For reasons I couldn't explain, the screen was rather static-y, and the voice fuzzy. You'd think he'd have gotten an upgrade. *"i am mr. house. i have been wa-"*

*"This is such bullshit!"* I turned my startled gaze to Serenity after her outburst, to find her glaring at the screen. *"You can't just talk to us from a screen! Do you have any idea what we went through to do your stupid job? At least talk'ta us face-to-face, stupid."*

*"heh. you are a smart filly."* Was the computer laughing? *"most take hours before they ask. yes I will show myself."*

So he wasn't just a voice or something? That was slightly disappointing. The door on the right side of the room cracked open. If you guessed that was where he was hiding, give yourself a cookie now.

Mr. House came out of the door. He was not exactly what I had been expecting. He was a short-statured earth pony, wearing a classy suit and hat. Surprisingly, from what I could see, he had exactly zero cybernetics. Considering his pretense of making all his employees be cyborgs, I couldn't help but feel cheated. Oh. And he was a ghoul. It was the easiest way to survive 200 years.

*"I,"* he said, trotting in front of his giant computer screen, *"am Mr. House."* He gave us a mocking bow. *"You are Hired Gun; do not bother with introductions. I know all about you. Yes. It is not every day a cyborg wanders into Dise and kills a gang leader, and, let me just say, you are horrible."* I... what? *"You made a sloppy mess of your schemes. Your killing of Roy, while not a bad idea, was executed, if you'll pardon the pun, poorly enough that anypony with a sufficient information network could have deduced you were the pony who did it. Dozens of better mercs walk into Dise every year, and most don't get half of the chance you are getting now."*

*"I am not hiring you because you are anything special; you are not. I am not hiring you because of whatever the starmetal has done to your insides; it does not matter. I am not hiring you because you are smart, or talented, or good at your job; you are not. I am hiring you because, for good or ill, you have become known in my city. What is more, known as a cyborg. I am the the cybernetic paragon in this city, and I do not like cyborgs getting loose and sullyng the name of my industry. For this reason, I plan to claim you. Hopefully by you agreeing, I can teach you how not to fuck up an assassination."*

He paced when he talked, and it was hard not to stand up straighter as he criticized me. He was clearly a pony that was used to being in charge. Oh, and he kept. Talking.

*"On the other hoof, I thoroughly enjoyed you throwing a wrench into Molly's schemes. She is a transparent ass, excuse me, and I had plans to stop her before she got too far, but seeing an idiot throw her for a loop? Well, that was juicy. I assume she must have insulted you something fierce for you to go so far out of your way to mess up her plans and incriminate her in the death of Roy as well."* he grinned with his stained yellow teeth. It was interesting. Unlike other ghouls I had known, his voice lacked that cracked, gravelly feeling. Maybe he had a voice synthesizer cybernetic? *"Now that that is over. High*

Stakes, your report?"

"Yes." High stakes seemed to stand straighter out of the corner of my eye. "Well, she appears to be an idiot." Yay. A glowing review. "However, she is an honest one. From what I have seen and the reports I have gathered, she is very, very strict when it comes to upholding her contract. Her lack of planning skills is made up by a strength that is at times frightening."

"And the child?"

"A liability," he admitted, "though a small one. It seems few ponies last long after threatening her."

Mr. House seemed unimpressed. I was okay with that. "Your recommendation?"

"Important but non-critical missions. Preferably outside of the city, where you may disassociate her if she goes off the rails, and where she can cause as much carnage as possible." Mr. House seemed to think about that for too long, so High Stakes continued. "She is not, as you can imagine, suited for infiltration or subterfuge."

Now that part confused me. If House tried to hire all the cybernetics, it'd be assumed that anypony with cybernetics was working for him (in fact Molly assumed I was at one point) so how could they spy? After a few minutes of rumination I realized not all cybernetics were as obvious as a metal leg. Like organ transplants, dermal armour, maybe an inner ear implant? I'd need to ask Serenity... oh wait, she hated me. Fuck.

"Though." Oh. Turns out High Stakes was still talking. That's all these important-type ponies did. Talk, and talk, and talk until their tongues fell off. "I would not put her on guard duty either. She is strong, but not perceptive, and prone to boredom. " I was not.... Nopony believes that, do you? Fuck. "Still, send her against something that needs to die messily, and they will die come hell or high water. Is that sufficient?" House nodded. "Now, can I ask why I am the one to give this report, rather than, say, an actual Hizai?"

Mr. House chuckled. "I appreciate your outside view." he turned back to me, bits of skin flaking from his face. "So, Hired Gun, considering your glowing recommendation, I will give you a deal. Five hundred caps a month, plus expenses. Of course, this includes a room here at the Black Salamander, as well as any meals you have while staying here. You still have to pay for chits if you want to gamble. I'll have Starscream draw up a formal contract. Obviously, it will include things like not ever taking a contract which could go against my interests bu-"

"Wait." He did. His mouth slammed shut, and his eyes shot me a glare that could melt a mirror. Not shatter, melt. "Why should I take the contract?" That is right. I just asked for details before blindly agreeing to the first contract I got. Karkhoof taught me that maybe I should ask questions before pledging my life on completely the mission. Make no mistake, I still would perform every contract I agreed to without question, but I decided to think before I agreed.

"Why? You mean other than the fact you've spurned every major gang to the point they'd rather kill you than look at you? That other than me, your choices are putting on a uniform, putting on a dress, or learning to be a doctor?" He adjusted his hat with a hoof. "Or more specifically. Do you expect me to monologue like a villain?"

I nodded.

"Well, at least you are honest. You want to work with me because I hold the only chance Dise has. War is coming, make no mistake about it. And when it comes, it will come with a fury the world hasn't seen in two hundred years. What do you think will happen to Dise? We are fractured and weak. We are the last city, a bastion to the resurgence of Old Caledonia, a hallmark of engineering and enterprise. But

when an *army* comes to our doorstep, do you imagine we, splintered as we are, have a chance? Dise will fall either to tyranny or to the bullet. What we need is a united front, and I am the only pony that can provide it. The other gangs hold onto their power and horde, only I have created more. I turned Cybernetics into an art form, and have started not only business, but business's essential counterpart: competition. Only I have survived two hundred years of in-fighting and gang wars. The others rise and fall, but I have been steady as the rocks the city was built on. I plan to rule Dise, and make it a centre of industry and progress. Make no mistake, I don't need you to work for me, but I am offering you the chance to have your hoof in the door.

"Still, I am sure it is a tough decision. If you would like, I can give you two days to decide. In the meantime, I have had a room prepared for you. If you choose not to accept there will be no repercussions, but if you do accept I can assure you that it will be worth it. I am very influential, and may be able to do something about the bounty on your head." I gulped, as he smiled and walked away. So that was Mr. House. When you invite him to monologue, he really gave it his one hundred and twenty percent.

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I take it back.

The BS was not plain at all. At least my room wasn't. I was given huge suite with three separate bedrooms, a living area, a kitchen, and two bathrooms. I know! It could have fit my house from Marefort inside it ten times over. The beds themselves were huge even for me, and the blankets smelled clean! Like, cleaned and everything. I thought I was hallucinating (which, actually, wouldn't have been that shocking). Damn. I knew this was a not-so-subtle manipulation by Mr. House, but damn.

"What's this?" Off in the corner of the living room was a rather large box, with a letter strapped to it.

"Oh." Starscream smiled at the box and flapped his metal wings. "Apparently some kid out west sent you a package. Mayhem seemed pissed he had to catalogue your mail." Mail? What, really?

I stepped up to it, and opened the letter. "Let's see. Dear Hired Gun, First of all, 'Hired Gun'? I'm thousands of kilometres away, and even I know that's a fake name." Ouch, that hurt random stranger guy. "Something something, didn't take a job. Oh. Beer. That's good... Who the fuck is Clover?" I shook my head and crumpled the letter up, then turned to Flare who had followed me to my room. "When did I turn down a job?"

Flare looked contemplative before answering, "When you lost that rib." Oh, yeah. Fucker hurt. "Some idiot came down asking you to take a job in some random desert. I turned him away for you."

"Right. I owe you a beer." I looked down at the box. I wasn't sure what Golden Harp was, but it sounded delicious. Unfortunately, drinking was going to have to wait.

Flare and I needed to have a little talk, and there was no way it was going to be good for anypony involved.

I looked around the room and sighed in relief. Serenity was off exploring our suite, Starscream seemed to have vanished, and High Stakes seemed to have left for his own personal room. It was just me and Flare left in the living room. "When did you join the Enclave again?"

His smile faded. "When did I-"

"You heard the question," I snapped. It had not been a good day. I was worn out, tired, grumpy and more than a little depressed. "Don't answer. Let me guess. Since I got you detoxed, right?"

"Four days after..." He admitted. That fucker. Four days after was when I was working for Roy, before I'd even infiltrated Molly's Casino. "Guess there's no point lying about-"

“You were spying on me-”

“Of course I was!” Flare laughed, but he didn't seem that jolly. “Fuck, Hired. I like you; you know that. It's nothing personal. You're a fun pony to drink with, and you've saved my ass. Hell, I'd call you a friend, but family comes first. Sky Fall told me I could get back in so long as I kept my eyes on you...” He shook out his mane. “It's not personal, really. It wasn't even your actions, he just wanted to know stupid shit. What time you got up. If you ever got sick. How pale you look. Signs of demonic possession. You know, the usual!”

“You spied on me!”

“The world is not about you, Hired,” he said softly. “Hard to believe, right? You're a good pony, really. But if you thought for one second I would throw away my family, my home, and the only life I've ever known for you, you are stupider than I ever could have imagined. You... hell, you cleaned me up and gave me a chance to get my life back, and now you're shocked when I took that opportunity? I didn't want to do it, but what choice did I have?”

Spied on me. My friend spied on me. My filly hated me. I never should have cared. It was easier when I didn't. Everything was going wrong, right when it should have been going right. Fuck Flare. Fuck his smarmy attitude. Fuck everything. I shouldn't have cared about him; he was always unreliable. Why was I shaking? He was just Flare.

“Hired, listen. I promise I ain't been giving no secrets. The stuff he wants to know... it doesn't matter. He still wants somepony spying on you, and it's better me to your face than somepony watching from a dis-”

“Get Out!”

He jumped back. I shouldn't have shouted. I knew I shouldn't have shouted. Everything was just getting too much to handle. There was nothing I could rely on, and things just kept getting worse. I was dying, and nopony cared. Flare needed to leave, because if he kept talking I was going to shut him up for good.

“I-” He started to talk but lowered his head, his ears drooping. “Sorry,” he murmured before turning and slowly leaving my room. The razor tail of his enclave armour swung back and forth as he walked, cutting up the door frame. He was gone, so what now? I needed a fucking drink.

So I walked over to the box of Golden Harp and pried it open. A few seconds later the first bottle was open, and in my mouth. I barely got a drop before I saw Serenity staring at me from the corner of my eye. With a heavy sigh, I put the bottle back down.

I really didn't want to talk to her.

“Why did you do it?” she asked, her voice so quiet. It was scary. There was something behind her words, something that hurt. A lot. “Why did you shoot him...”

“I...” I gritted my teeth together. “Because I... I was paid to.” It was a weak excuse. Of course it was, but it was the truth. “I wasn't aiming for him.” Yet he died. What did intent matter when the result was the death of foals? I couldn't agree with my own arguments. “I... didn't.”

“You killed him!” I winced. She was crying again. Of course, she was. I was built up as an idol. Something to praise, and now I took that out from under her. Her idol couldn't even make up a proper excuse. Her sad grey eyes seemed to ask: how could I ever want this monster to be my mother?

“I did.”

“Why?!”

“It was an accident.”

“You don't even care.” If only she knew how wrong she was. “I thought... I thought you were different! You were supposed to be,” she sobbed back up at me. I did this to her. I made her see me for who I was. Part of me knew it was better for her to face the truth now, but the rest of me wanted to kick myself for hurting her. “I... you saved me... so how could you kill him?”

I bit the bridle, pulled the trigger, let the bullet fly. How? Easily. Killing ponies is the easy part, it's the living with yourself after that is tricky.

“I'm not a good pony...” I looked away. “You had to see. You deserve better...”

“But I wanted you! You didn't have to kill him! You didn't have to take the job. You could have said no. You should have said no. You would have said no. You... you only did it to teach me a lesson! That's not... it's not fair!” No... it wasn't fair. She may have been right. Maybe I did take the job just to show her I was horrible. Somehow that made me so much worse. “You're... how...”

She sniffled before wiping her nose with her foreleg. “You were supposed to my Momma.”

“Is that all you care about?” Stop talking, Silver. Let it go. Don't get angry. Stop it! The words came out anyway. “You say I don't care, yet it doesn't matter to you who I am. You just want me to protect you, and who gives a fuck about my opinion on the matter? You're so desperate for family you're trying to create one where it doesn't belong, and then whenever we fail to live up to your ideals you pout and cry until we do what you want.” She's just a filly; shut up, Silver. Why couldn't I just let it go. It didn't matter. And yet... “You've been manipulating me since I saved you. I care, but you're trying to force me into a role I'm not ready for. That ain't right, and you know it. I... I can't do this Serenity! And you're not making it any easier!”

I looked down at her. My mind was swimming, my whole body ached, and I was so mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted I just felt like falling over and never getting up. However, when I looked at her face it made everything that much worse. It was twisted in a grimace, that looked like she was trying to process fifty emotions all at once. She was looking at me, and for the first time she saw me for who I really was.

A monster.

So when she started to cry and fled the room, I didn't bother to chase her. I just stared blankly at where she had been. My mind tried to process the things I had just said to her. I tried to see how she must have felt. I really was a monster. “Dear Princess Celestia,” I mumbled, still in complete shock at what I'd said, “I fucked up.”

“I'm back in the city I hate.” I stormed over and grabbed the still open bottle of Golden Harp. I chugged it in a single go, not even bothering to taste it. “My soon-to-be-employer knows I'm an idiot.” I looked down at the open box. The bottles of beer stood ready for me. My own personal army. “My friends spy on me.” I grabbed the entire box in my teeth.

The largest bedroom was only a few feet away, through a door. So I stormed in there and threw the box over the large bed. Bottles spilled out, covering it, but not a single one broke. “And my filly?” I flopped on the bed and grabbed another bottle in my mouth. “She ran away. Back to the Watchers probably.” I downed the bottle.

Fuck, everything hurt so much. I just wanted to stick a Med-X in my eye and make all the pain go away.

I dropped the empty bottle, flopping back into the bed. I may have been crying, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered. “Serenity hates me. I made her hate me. I said horrible things to her because I'm

horrible.”

I drank another bottle. And then another. Maybe if I drank enough, I could die, and this would all go away.

Footnote: Level Up...

Something: You can't really remember what perk you took, but it was probably a stupid one...

((A/N: I would like once again to thank kkat for creating this world I so lovingly defiled, and to heap praise upon my editors theBSDude, ErrantIndy, and Julep, without whom this story would be a mess of improper commas and run on sentences. Oh, and don't forget to check out my [Asksilverstorm](#) blog!))

((Oh, you're still reading. The chapter's done, but if you want some more Fallout Equestria goodness you could always check out these stories: [Operation Flankorage](#), [Tales Of A Courier Reloaded](#), [Heroes With Wings](#), and [Guise Of Chaos](#) ))

## Chapter 14: Vanishing Act

*"If you let my daughter go now, that'll be the end of it. I will not look for you; I will not pursue you. But if you don't, I will look for you, I will find you, and I will kill you."*

"Get up."

The words were like a hammer to my skull. Each syllable pounded harder and harder, and all I could do was squeeze my eyes tighter and hope they went away. Something smelled awful. Like dirt-stained piss, vomit, and stale beer. It was better than my dreams though. Someone once told me that you didn't dream when you passed out drunk. Someone lied. It was the usual dream. There was blood dripping, lengths of rope, hopeless situations. Only this time it accompanied with the smell of burning colt. Being awake was bad, but sleeping? There was no question.

"Get up."

That sound again. Like griffon claws on a chalk board... not that I had any idea what that sounded like. But it sounded bad. My stomach lurched under me. I didn't puke, though. I wanted to. I felt so icky. So very gross. And thirsty. I could have drunk The Snake dry.

"Get up. We won't ask again."

Fuck off. I didn't say that though. I let out a pitiful groan and rolled over onto an empty beer bottle. It prodded up into my chest where there should have been a rib. Of course I'd had that taken out a while ago... the bottle didn't hurt much though. Not compared to my head... or the rest of me. It was a nice distraction from feeling like shit. Nothing less than I des-

Everything was suddenly cold and wet.

My eye shot open. After pushing my wet mane out of my eye, I saw Flare and High Stakes standing in front of my bed, a bucket floating in front of them in a green glow. "What th-ARGGH" The light! It burned! Like someone shoved the sun into my eye hole. Oh, goddess. I grabbed my eye and fell back. "Fuckfuckfuck, fuck off!"

"Hired, get up. You're markedly less fun when you're wallowing in depression." And High Stakes was a lot more fun without a fucking head. What did he know anyway? He was a heartless bastard. I killed a foal then lost one, and what would he know about that? Fucker needed to learn his place and leave me be.

"Fuck you." Fuck was my new favourite word, and I didn't give a single one. "Flare's a fucking Enclave spy, and you fucking ruined my bed with your fucking bucket of whateverthefuckitwas." It felt like a drill was slowly boring its way into my skull. "So leave me alone. To wallow... in whatever it is I'm wallowing in." A mix of water, vomit, and beer it seemed like.

If Wildfire were here, she'd have let me have my misery... that was a lie, but I'd like to think she'd at least understand.

"Hired." Suddenly I was floating. Oh fuck. Fuck me sideways with a silver spoon. My good eye opened, light pounding into it, setting my brain on fire, to see I was hovering a good meter off the bed. I turned my head as I lashed out with my hooves trying to fight the green glow that surrounded me. "This is not good at all." High Stakes said as his horn was wrapped in multiple layers of shining green light. Beams seemed to break away from it like he was having trouble holding them in. Was I really that heavy? "Mr. House has, against all logic, given you an offer of a lifetime. An offer I shall never

receive. I refuse to see you fuck it up.”

In a dizzying flash of magic, I found myself tumbling head over hooves into the bathroom. I shook my head and opened my eye just to see the door slam shut. “You aren't leaving until you shower and get yourself together...” There was a slight pause. “And you already ruined your bed anyway!” I did not! I just puked on it. A little bit... a lot.

With a groan, I flopped back. And immediately cracked my skull against the bathtub. Swearing like a fucker, I grabbed the back of my head. Of course, I did it with my metal hoof. Turns out that after smacking your head against something you shouldn't kick yourself in the same spot.

Long story short, I was curled in a ball on the bathroom floor, my chest coated with vomit, and my head pounding like it never had before. So I was a pathetic piece of shit. Why did it matter? I always knew I was, I just had to be reminded every once in a while.

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't cry on the floor all day. Serenity had left, but I had to make sure she made it to The Watchers. I don't know why I even cared, but I did. It was the least I could do (quite literally) to make sure she got safely to the place I forced her to go. Yes, I still cared about her, and that was the problem. I've been keeping a running list of things I cared about and it was not looking good. I brought doom upon ponies. Doom. What a fucking stupid word.

I can't even wallow properly!

I stood. My legs wobbled under me (save for my cybernetic one), but I stood. The bathroom was small enough having all the basic amenities you'd expect. I turned slowly to the cracked mirror above the sink and shrunk back from myself.

My coat was pale, dirty, and slick with sweat, not to mention crusted with vomit in places. My mane hadn't fared much better, and somehow looked worse the way it was plastered to my face, and was matted to the point I doubt I'd ever be able to get the knots out. And I would rather not get into the way my tail looked. I prodded idly at the makeshift eye patch over the hole in my skull. Against my better judgment I slid it off my face to see what the ruins of my eye looked like.

Urgh. You really don't want to know. Trust me. It wasn't good.

I blinked my right eyelid. Oh good, at least that still worked. It would have been a bitch to shower with water soaking into my throbbing eyehole.

I turned to the shower. I'd never seen a shower before, so I'd no idea what I was supposed to do with it. The porcelain tub was set into the far wall, with a little door facing outwards so I could walk in. I gave the room a quick scan for a bathtub and came up empty. I guess I was learning how to shower. No way could I fuck that up horribly. Who was I kidding? I could fuck anything up horribly.

First thing first. I prodded at my cybernetic for a few minutes before it came off with a hiss and plopped to the ground. Then I started to tilt. Fuck. Stop. The metal plating on my shoulder slammed into a wall sending spikes of pain through my torso. Great. More pain. That's what I needed. Everything hated me, even myself. Groaning, I hobbled forward towards the shower. It might have been easier to just buck the door down and tell High Stakes to stick it where the sun don't shine, but honestly I felt so weak I doubted I could.

Okay, so showers are weird. When I finally got in and the short door closed, I realized the faucet-nozzle-things were hanging length wise from the ceiling. Made perfect sense right? On the floor of the shower right in front of where my forehoof stood was a series of buttons? Pressure plates... things. I stepped on the one that said soap and immediately I felt a cold gel like thing fall onto my back. With another press it was followed by water. Hot, hot water.

It took a little bit of getting used to ( I nearly jumped out of my skin when water spurted from the floor. It made sense, but it was shocking), but after a little bit, it felt. Nice. The warm water soaked into my coat, and I could feel the dirt and grime of the day before washing off me. My wet mane fell into my eye, and lacking an extra hoof to brush it away, I let myself be blinded by it.

As the water streamed down my face, I did my best not to think. It didn't really work. Even with my eye closed I could still see the fire. In my mind, Post Haste was still burning, only when I pictured him, he was charcoal grey with a long green mane.

I really did kill him, didn't I? The thought left me numb inside. Like a little piece of me died with him. I'd spent weeks doing my best to protect a filly and instead killed a colt. It seemed I was a danger to foals everywhere. I either failed to save them or killed them with my own hoof. From Misfit, to Post Haste, to... her. No pony was safe. The shower washed away my tears.

How was I supposed to go on? I had to survive, but how could I live with myself after what I'd done? How could I go on...? It was a good thing Serenity left. She would be happier without me. If it hadn't happened in Karkhoof, it just would've happened later. It was better she saw me for who I was, now. It'd hurt less. Maybe she was trying to force me to be her mother, but she didn't understand why I couldn't be. It's not a thing I could have explained. I wasn't good with words. So I had to show her.

Right?

It's funny. I was so sure it was the right decision when I pulled the trigger. But I'd still spent the hours since trying to convince myself of it. As time passed, I realized that I wasn't even convincing myself. I tried to imagine that maybe if I hit my intended target. That if Serenity hadn't altered my shot, maybe it wouldn't have felt so bad. But when it came right down to, it I made a shitty choice and paid for it.

It felt good. Rivets of water washed down my face, a few dripping into my eyehole, stinging it. It felt good that I lost my eye. That I paid the price. It felt good to know that Serenity was safely back at the Watchers', away from me. Even though I made a shitty choice... I wouldn't have changed it. It needed to happen. She needed to see why...

Why it didn't matter how much I cared for her... how much I loved her... because I could never be her mother.

I couldn't. I choked up, tears still streaming down my face. I fell to the shower floor and buried my face in my foreleg. I just couldn't do it. I killed that colt because I was afraid. Afraid of getting hurt again. The water washed over me like Celestia's tears. As I sobbed, I had to wonder what it was all for. Why did I keep getting up in the morning? I was a stupid pony whose only expertise was death and destruction. I couldn't help build the world. I knew that trying to save it was useless. My mind was so utterly warped that the idea of getting close to a pony made me freak out and shoot kids. So why did I persist in charging through the wasteland with only half a brain? I... there was nothing I could offer the world so maybe it would be better if I was dead....

I let the thought sink in. It was a dangerous thing, that idea, but it didn't leave. It festered in my brain as I laid there. The option was tempting. So very tempting.

Until I heard a familiar voice in the back of my head say, "Survive."

So I got up, dried myself off, and prepared myself for the day. I couldn't die. Not yet.

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"Huh. You look... better." Was it really that shocking, Flare? After I had showered and re-attached my leg (it fucking hurt), I did my best to brush my mane (noting how long and annoying it was getting) and tail. I also attempted to get my makeshift eye patch on but it was really difficult without magic so I

gave up. Let them see my ruined eye, maybe I could scare somepony into submission.

“You still look like shit.” I rolled my eye at the blue pegasus. My bedroom was mostly the same as it was before, though the beer bottles had been taken away, and the bed stripped for cleaning. The room would have looked much better, though, if High Stakes and Flare weren't in it.

“Whoa, a joke?” Not really... “You must be hanging out with me too often. Might be I'm finally breaking your poker face. Oh! I know! We could be a touring comedian act-”

“Flare. Shut up.” He did. Good. “Does High Stakes know you're spying on me?” I asked with a raise of my eyebrow. To my surprise the tall stallion nodded.

“I have known for a while, in fact. He had described to me the extent of what he was doing and I deemed it reasonable. So long as he doesn't divulge information on Mr. House, I could care less what he tells his master...” Right, High Stakes didn't like Skyfall for whatever reason. He did like Flare though, even though Starscream didn't like him. Flare, of course, disliked the Steel Rangers and the feelings were mutual and...

I really should make a chart. I couldn't keep straight who hated who.

“Whatever.” I aimed my glare at Flare. “You're spying on what exactly? My health?” He nodded. That made perfect sense. Except that it didn't. “Nothing else?” He nodded again. I had to wonder if I knew what he was spying about if it still counted as spying... “Right. Honestly, I don't fucking care. You said he'd get another spy if I killed you?” Another nod. “Right. You can stay then. Don't trust you none. But I'd rather you than someone from a distance.” At least with Flare I could scare him into obedience and make use of his skills.

Also, what did I care if he spied on me? I had no grand secrets or plans. So, he wants to tell some big shot about my pissing habits because said big shot thinks I was dying, why should I care? Yeah, I mean, it did hurt that he went behind my back like that, but it was my stupid fault for trusting him anyway. Besides, he was right, if I was in his position I'd do the same thing. So, even though I wanted to hate him, it would have been stupid to do so.

“Wait, seriously?” He grinned. “High Stakes, you owe me fifty caps. I told you she'd let me stay.” With a resigned sigh, and the slightest smirk, High Stakes tossed the pegasus the bag of caps. Apparently my actions were the subject of gambling now. Good to know...

I kicked him hard in the knee with my metal leg, sending him face first into the floor. Before anypony could react, I place my hoof on his head and pressed. “Flare.” I lowered my head to make sure he could hear me. “Lie to me again.” I pressed down hard enough for him to gasp in pain. “And I will kill you.” I pressed down more forcefully, “Got it?” There was no response so I pressed down harder. “Got. It.” It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

“Y-eah. G-got it.” I got off his head and shook my cybernetic leg. Huh, it felt weird. I guess it didn't matter. “Could have just asked.” Flare grunted rubbing the back of his head, “But I got it. Lying bad. Truth good. Or Hired smash.” Damn fucking straight. “Thanks for the help, ass.” Flare glared at High Stakes.

The pale green unicorn shrugged. “Have you seen her? You really expected me to help you against her? I am many things, but suicidal is not one of them.” Of course he wasn't. Yet, I had a feeling he would attack me without hesitation if he were paid to. We were the same in that respect.

“That's a shame.” I walked past them and into the living room of our Suite.

To see Starscream sleeping on my couch. Oh, for fuck's sake, I am not that popular. Everypony needed to leave me alone.

So I kicked him in the ribs. Not very hard, but it was enough to have him jumping into the air, his metal wings humming, and him glaring at me. “Oh.” His expression softened. “I was looking for you, but was told you were showering. And well, your couch is very comfortable,” He smiled amiably at me. “Have you taken Mr. Houses offer to heart yet? He is eager to get it over with.”

“Well...” I’d spent last night getting drunk, and feeling sorry for myself. Not much time to think of his offer.

“Doesn't matter! I have spoken to him and he has agreed to give you a prototype cybernetic eye as a sweetener to his offer. Normally, he would not bother, but he needs a new test subject for his toys, and even his most loyal subjects balk at losing their eye.” His metal wings flapped and hummed and he returned to the floor. “Oh.” My shoulder burned as he pulled out an eyepatch from his saddle bag and floated it over to me, “Much better than what you had. See.” He slipped it over my eye and I... didn't see. Obviously.

“Haven't decided.” And I wouldn't until I made sure Serenity was nice and comfortable. After that... maybe. It seemed like honest enough work and was right up my alley. It would be a steady paycheck, and having my ammo paid for was a nice perk too. I supposed I should have made my decision based on his promises of utopia but really... I found his proclamations the night before a bit hard to swallow. Three cheers for scepticism!

“C'mon, Hired,” Flare zipped up beside me. “Think about it! You'd be part of the second best group in Dise. Travel the wasteland righting wrongs and assassinating political enemies. It's a dream come true.” No. And I would like it if he didn't drape his leg over my shoulders like that. “And, most importantly. You would make High Stakes really, really jealous.” Now that was tempting. “So just get the little miss and... and where is Serenity anyway?”

Oh. Yeah.

“She left...”

“Serenity le-” he cut himself off mid shout before saying a bit softer, “What did you do?” I winced and avoided eye contact. “You must have done something. That poor filly adored you...” Maybe I should have told Flare or High Stakes what happened but... fuck that noise. “You're aren't going to tell me are you? Of course not! I'm just Flare the loveable pegasus companion who is always kept out of the loop an-” Oh, for fuck's sake. He knew more about what was going on in the world than me! He had no right to complain. Ass.

“Wow. The pegasus chump sure likes to talk, now doesn't he?” Starscream smiled. He was forever smiling. “C'mon, Miss Hired Gun, I'll give you a short tour of the facility. I know you are busy, but it will not be long.”

“Do you do this for all potential recruits?” He seemed a bit too interested in me.

“Course. At least for all the ponies what could be working under my tutelage.” I... er... what? “Oh? I thought you knew. The Hizai are split into three divisions. Internal handles security in the Black Salamander and Dise proper. Infiltration does... exactly what you think it does, and Operatives handle missions outside pertaining to Mr. House's yadda yadda yadda. All you need to know is: if you join you'll be working for me directly as I am the leader, for lack of a better term, of the operatives. I also handle most mercenary contracts when we are understaffed. Right, Mr. Stakes?”

“I really hate you, Starcream. I just felt it was important for me to get that off my chest.” High Stakes said blandly. The robotic alicorn just whinnied.

“Of course, you do.” Starscream shook his head. “The stories I could tell you about that one. Never

trust that stallion to walk behind you.” Uh, I. Sure, whatever. He was winking at me when he said that, too, making me even more confused. “For later though, I am sure Mr. Stakes would kill me for speaking. Nice chap. Onwards and outwards I say.” Without another word, he trotted out my door into the hotel proper.

So, I followed.

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“...used to live in Caledonia before the war. They had the most amazing ability to regrow lost limbs. After Mr. House procured the hotel for his purposes, he named it after them.” History lessons. I hate history lessons. It didn't help that Starscream had a lot of them.

I mean, I appreciated that he showed us through the hotel hospital thing: the first three floors were hotel rooms, the next five hospital, and the top floors were reserved for the Hizai and Mr. House himself. It is, I suppose, important to note that the Hizai were not the only ponies under Mr. Houses pay. They were simply his enforcers. It was interesting to see the cybernetics lab, but it was hard to pay attention. I just kept getting a nagging feeling in the back of my head that Serenity would have enjoyed it so much more than I.

“Here we are! The crown jewel of The Black Salamander, the casino floor!” He fluttered into the air so he could point with both hooves more dramatically as we walked out of the elevator.

I had to say, it was impressive. The room seemed to be set up with various levels sinking into the floor, kind of like an upside down pyramid. The bottom-most level seemed to be the High Rollers' tables, given the extravagance of it. The next level seemed to be craps, followed by blackjack, then the one legged bandits, followed finally by the top level I was on that seemed to have the bars and cashier places. The entire area was decked in red carpet and gold trimming, with a fancy (and large) chandelier hanging in the centre of the room.

Of course I noticed right away that the chandelier was hanging right over the High Roller's pit, so if it was to fall a lot of rich ponies would die. That was literally the first thing I noticed. Apparently, I was becoming morbid as well. Lovely.

“Thanks, Star. We need to go now.” I'd meant to leave a while ago. I was sure Serenity was safely at the Watchers', but I just wouldn't be satisfied until I knew for sure.

“Are you sure? There is so much more I can show you. How ab-”

“Starscream.” Flare zipped in front of him, both floating in the air. “Buddy, pal, guy... You need to learn to use your ears. It's important for living, you know? When the mare says she needs to go that means she needs to... you know, go. Ain't that hard to figure out, ya know? Now! I am sure you're a smart unicorn... thing there, but you should work on comprehension, get it?” He paused to grab Starscream's shoulders. “What she is trying to say is, leave her the fuck alone for five minutes. Dumbass.”

“Oh, my apologies,. He smiled and backed off. “I have work to attend to anyway.” And so he left the way we came. He really was a strange buck.

“Where are we going anyway?” High Stakes asked.

“Well...” I started moving around the pit. “To the Watchers. I need to make sure Serenity is safely there.”

“So, you ever going to tell us what exactly happened back at Zebra-Ville?” Flare asked as I weaved around a mare with a tray of drinks on her back. By 'weaved around' I clearly meant 'stole a drink from'. It burned going down, and I probably shouldn't have spat the glass on the ground, but fuck it. “Seriously. Hired. Stop dodging the question. You're a terrible liar an-”

“Fuck off, Flare.” Maybe I should have killed him. It would have been easier than answering questions. Questions led to memories, which lead to guilt, which lead to visions of Misfit dying. I mean Post Haste... I shook my head but he kept peppering me with questions. “Flare. Seriously.”

“Fuck off?” He shrugged, “It's actually a fair bit harder than you think, I mean without thumbs you have to use both hooves an-” Oh Celestia, I did not just hear that. Bleach, I needed it. I needed it bad.

“High Stakes, please. Make him stop.” There was a sensation of burning magic, and when I turned up to the flying pegasus he had a wad of cloth stuck in his mouth. Ahh, the peace and quiet. Okay, the casino floor was actually fairly full and not quiet at all, but you know what I mean. “Thanks. You're a pal.”

“I am here to serve... or whatever. Frankly, his constant chatter has a habit of breaking the moment. So, you were about to tell us what exactly happened when I was dismissed from the room at Karkhoof.” Oh for Celestia's sake, his glasses were shinning again. “From what I can recall, you threw me out. A few minutes later most of the town was burning, Serenity had run off, and you had lost an eye. Something important must have happened. Though what, I cannot know. Given past evidence, I am going to guess you killed somepony. Brutally.”

“High Stakes.” I gave my best 'shut the fuck up voice' but he kept talking.

“Now, I know you'd never kill a foal, but I do not think Serenity would react so hostile otherwise...” Fuck off. I stormed forward slamming through the doors of the casino into the outside.

“Shut. Up. Now.”

He didn't. “So maybe you were aiming for someone, but a foal got in the way. Or...”

“High Stakes.”

“Or Maybe Serenity tried to stop you and altered your shot. Am I getting clo-”

CRACK

The force of my buck sent him flying backwards into the doors of the casino. His head slammed backwards into the door so forcefully it left a dent. Slowly he slid down the door until he was resting against it, a swath of blood covering the door. Flare rushed to his aid immediately as I fumed, rage filling my ears. “High Stakes.” I seethed, as Flare fed him a healing potion. “Fuck off.”

I turned and stormed down the Dise street.

They followed me slowly but kept their distance and didn't talk. To that extent I stopped long enough to click on my Radio. Mr. New Haygas was far more interesting the fucktard duo behind me. “...*refugees keep filing in from the war in the north. Despite reports that the pony known as 'The Light Bringer' defeated the Enclave, war still rages across the wasteland. Lacking space in the city-proper, many of the refugees have taken up shelter in the ruins of Eastern Celestia's Paradise, now known as Eastside. The NCA has expressed fears about the state of the refugees, stating that unless they are given food, shelter, and water there is a strong likelihood they could become desperate. They have said publicly that the last thing Dise needs is a new raider gang within minutes of the city.*

*Speaking of raiders, it seems a group of raiders who have traditionally kept to themselves in the border between Caledonia and Equestria have started moving south. Little is known about their motives, but the NCA plans to send an envoy asking about their intentions.*

*More news let us see. Mayhem has issued a boil order for all water in the city after some ponies in the slums have taken ill. According to him the issue appears to be with one particular fountain, but has requested all ponies boil their water if they can, until he can look into the issue fully.*

*Finally I need to end this broadcast on a sad note. It seemed that the section of Celestia's Paradise that went to Karkhoof has been wiped out,"* I stopped in the middle of the street. That. That couldn't be right. They retreated what... *"After the battle in Karkhoof yesterday, they were forced to retreat. Reports are still coming in but it seems the mercenaries they hired for safety fled after the fight, leaving them alone. That night their camp was beset by Zebra Assassins killing everyone inside except for the foals and Righteous Song herself. Details are still fuzzy, and we will update you when more information becomes available."*

They killed them all. Every last one. Except for the foals. Why. Why would they do that? I had thought after Celestia's Paradise left the fighting would be over. For fuck's sake. *"The NCA has already condemned the attacks, as they are wont to do, and has already insisted on retribution. There is no way this won't end up horribly... time for some music!"*

Good job, Silver. You solved nothing at all. This shouldn't be a shock. Maybe that was my special talent. When things went wrong on an epic scale, things tended to turn to rubble. Perhaps that is what the rocks on my flank represented. My ability to turn victory into defeat just by existing.

I really needed to kick something, and High Stakes was too far back to reach.

I eventually did storm my way over to the Watcher's Fort in southern Dise. To my surprise, Ginger, the minotaur, was standing in between the two pony guards at the front gate making them look a bit uncomfortable. The minotaur had that effect on ponies. I think it was either the way he looked like somepony took a bunch of different animals and sewed them together or the way he stood on two legs. Mostly the two legged thing. I know griffins could walk like that (but preferred all four), and I heard that hellhounds and diamond dogs could walk like that as well, but it didn't stop it from being creepy.

The Minotaur stared down at me. "Hello, Ginger," I said up at it. Of course, Ginger said nothing but to point with one of his fingers (digits are creepy) at one of the guards. Obviously, indicating for me to talk with one of them. It was a shame; I really wanted to hear him speak. "Right." I turned to the guards. "Hey. Did you two work last night?"

One of the guard ponies with a long red mane nodded.

"Did you see a filly come by?"

She shook her head. I felt something in my stomach twist.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep," The guard said. "Worked all night. Ain't no one came at all last night, certainly not no filly." Okay. Calm, Silver. Serenity could have just snuck past them. She was a sneaky pony with her magic and everything.

"I need to talk to Clean Cutt."

"I..." The guard looked abashed before muttering something into the device on her foreleg. It looked sort of like a pipbuck, but different. I couldn't exactly hear what she was saying, but I was sure the number six came up once or twice as she spoke. "He will be one minute. Please wait right here."

I waited. Flare and High Stakes got up the nerve to come sit beside me too, so that was good. I didn't really mean to kick High Stakes that hard... he was just pissing me off. So I apologized for kicking him so hard. A bit out of character for me, but I felt it was important. Maybe I was actually learning, but I doubted that.

Eventually the leader of the Watchers did show himself. Clean Cutt always mildly creeped my out, mostly due to his pitch black eyes. Still, he was nice for the most part so I ignored it. "Ah, Hired Gun. It has been a while. How is Serenity?" Oh, fuck.

“You... don't know?”

The blue buck stared blankly at me with his dark eyes and shook his head. “I... No. You lost Serenity?” There was a tone in his voice that I really didn't like. “Did you really? In the city?”

“Well. I had thought she'd come here.” That was not only the truth of it; that was the plan. Where else could she have possibly gone?! This was not good, not good at all.

“Hired Gun,” he said, his tone harsh, “you must find her. There have been a rash of kidnappings in the city recently. Orphans have gone missing, and nopony has been able to find them... if Serenity is with them. It is vital you find her.”

Missing. Kidnapped. No no no no. This was not the plan at all! She was supposed to be safe! Healthy. Not trapped Celestia knows where. I stood up forcefully, my heart in my throat and my stomach twisting so much it hurt. I needed to find her. Before... no I couldn't think of that. I just needed to find her.

Fuck.

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Okay. Calm, Silver. Calm.

“Hired, calm down, if you keep pacing like that you're liable to make somepony dizzy.” Fuck off, Flare. Okay, he was mostly right. I stopped and took a deep breath. I hadn't gotten fifteen feet from the Watcher fort before completely flipping out. Serenity was gone. Vanished. Poof. Just like that. No combination of that could ever be a good thing. Ever. I had to find her. I caused this. Again. I couldn't let it happen again. Whoever was kidnapping orphaned foals had to be up to no good. I was going to find them and use their body parts to decorate my suite, I swear to Celestia.

I shut my eye. Calm, Silver. Think about something calming. Lengths of rope are not calming, stop that. Even with my eye closed I thought I could see a spark of red. I wasn't deliriously in pain, she shouldn't be here. Wildfire just sighed at me.

My eye snapped open. Okay. Freaking out and going insane. There was nothing good about this. Calm Silver. “Okay.” I stopped pacing. “Need to think of a plan. Need to. Find her.”

Flare flapped into the air and flipped upside down so his frown looked like a smile. “Didn't you want her away anyway? I mean this was your plan, wasn't it? Obviously I'm lacking in details, but if High Stakes guessed right, why do you even care?” Because she's still my filly! I wanted her away from me because I cared about her, because I knew if she stayed with me something horrible would happen to her!

Seemed I was too late in that regard. My bad luck had already spread, and now she was kidnapped by Celestia knows who. “Flare. Shut up. It's not the time.”

“I have spoken in depth to Clean Cutt.” High Stakes said making me nearly jump out of my skin. Fucking ponies sneaking up on my blind spot. I hadn't even realized he wasn't with us, shows how much I pay attention. “He seems to have little information on the disappearance. Though he claims Mayhem might know something.” How woul- “from what he said a new recruit of Mayhem vanished, and he never lets things like that go uncovered.”

“Mayhem. Got it.” I needed to go there then. Back to the Moon. Apparently, it was still mostly standing after the attack, though I doubted Mayhem would be using Roy's penthouse. If I remembered correctly most of the glass was blown out in Molly's attack, and who knows what else got destroyed. Besides, it didn't seem to be Mayhem's style.

Because I knew all about style.

“I have a question!” I looked up at Flare who was still hanging upside down. “Does your eye hurt or something? You've been strangely quiet about it.” I've had better things to think about.

“Yes.” It hurt constantly. Despite still feeling the effects of my hangover (I have kindly left most of them out of the narrative to avoid being repetitive about how shitty I felt), my eye throbbed constantly. It was like a knife was stuck in there and just kept twisting. To that end I'd taken a Med-X to help make it less, pain-y. “A lot.”

“Oh goodie. I've always wondered what it'd be like losing a body part. After seeing you I changed my mind. It clearly does nothing for looks, or brains.” He was getting one step closer to losing a body part with every word, I swear.

So I turned and walked down the street.

I hated Dise on principle, but it was amazing. Sure, most of the buildings were falling into rubble but for the most part many were still intact. More amazingly was that ponies walked back and forth without fear of being, you know, randomly killed. No Steel Rangers to confiscate technology. No land sharks to rise from the ground. No raiders or pirates, or little wars. Sure, sometimes you could get killed in a gang war, but compared to outside the wall, it was, for the most part, peaceful. Though a city of vice and suckitude, it was hard to find a place safer.

I spent most of the walk trying my best not to think. Thinking led to bad thoughts. Thoughts like 'Seriously what the fuck, Silver? You let her get kidnapped! Who knows where she is, or what the pervert who kidnapped her is doing? You fucking fucktard why would you think it would be a good idea to let her off on her own, ever? Seriously. What the hell?' And there I go again. Lovely.

I think Flare was talking as we walked, but I wasn't really paying attention. Partly because I was still pissed at him, but mostly because I just couldn't concentrate. Whine whine moan. I know! But my filly was missing! How else was I supposed to react? Why couldn't she do this one thing? I just wanted her to be safe, I just...

I stopped to wipe the tears from my eye and continued on my way.

“Hey. Hey, Hired.” Huh. I shook my head and turned to see Flare flying in my blindspot. “Hey, are you alright? You seem more out of it than normal...” No, I was not alright! “Okay, I guess that was a stupid question. Listen, I'm sure Serenity will be fine, okay? And she'll forgive you for whatever happened at Karkhoof, so don't worry. It'll all work out.” I didn't want her to forgive me. I wanted her to hate me from a safe distance. “Seriously. C'mon, insult me or something. This mopey Hired is getting hard to take. Do ya wanna kick me?”

I smiled, just a little bit, at that. “Sure. Stand still.”

Flare laughed but flew away. Right. I needed to work on this not being mopey thing. How about stressing out? Is that mopey. Calm Silver. Just breathe. You can do this.

I gritted my teeth and stormed into The Moon. I could do this. Flare was right. I'd find Serenity. Kick the ass of whoever thought it was a good idea to touch my filly, and deposit her back with the Watchers where she belonged. I could do this.

“I'm sorry, baby. You're gunna have to leave the gun here.” I stopped at the entrance and stared at the suited stallion at the front desk. He was not a pony I recognized. That was strange mostly because I knew every freaking pony who worked at the Moon. Or I did. I guess I had been gone for a while, and with Mayhem running the show...

“You can't have Subtlety.” I could not stress that part enough.

“Baby, now I ain't askin. See this is how it rolls in the Moon: you give us your weapons, or you get the fuck out.” Who the fuck was this guy? I was going to give him my gun alright, right after I give him my- Suddenly, Subtlety was floating off my back, and my shoulder burned. “High Stakes!” I turned and glared at the chuckling unicorn.

“Hired, I'd rather you not get us shot. I know how hard that is for you, but you could at least make an attempt.” Oh, now he was going to mock me, too! Fuck stallions. And not in that way. “For now let us meet this Mayhem and get the answers you seek.” Stop being right; I hate you so much.

“It's all good, baby.” The door greeter stallion welcoming guy said as he carefully put Subtlety and Bunker Buster away. “We'll take good care of them. Don't you worry your pretty little head off. They'll be safe and sound till you need to leave. Not sure why you'd ever want to.” That's because you're an idiot. Big surprise there. A stallion with shit for brains.

I stormed past, my two shit-headed stallions following behind. The Moon was looking pretty good considering. There was a section in the far back wall that had to be boarded up (no doubt where the Baises decided it'd be fun to blow it up), but beyond that there was little sign of physical damage. The debris were cleared and cleaned, and it was business as usual. Though the dancer on the stage wasn't Mayflower... a bit of a shame she was such a lovely mare. Instead it was a new mare I'd never seen. I was sensing a pattern here.

“Ah, The Moon. How I missed you. The smells. The views. The alcohol, th-”

“Really, Flare?” High Stakes chuckled, and I could almost hear his glasses shine. “I suppose it is to be expected. But I was hoping you had more refined tastes than... here. I feel sullied just by stepping into this place.” Try being a tad more arrogant. Might help your image.

“Don't be like that! This place is like the heaven of sin and debauchery.” Flare fluttered up just so he could spread his forelegs out and spin dramatically.

“You mean hell,” High Stakes offered helpfully, only to gain a spiteful look from Flare.

At least my companions made themselves useful by distracting me from my panic attack. “You're no fun at all, you know that?” Flare groaned, still floating. “A stallion just wants to have a little fun, and you 'tut tut' all over it. Well I, for one, refuse to bow down to your 'tut tutting'.”

“I never said 'tut tut' I just sai-” High Stakes was cut off by a furious round of 'tut tutting' by Flare. It was difficult not to smile at that, but I was well-practised at not smiling.

It did occur to me as I walked, that I didn't know where I was going. I mean, I knew The Moon like the back of my hoof (insert “I never saw that before” joke here) but I didn't know where Mayhem was. He clearly wasn't going to take up Roy's shattered suite. So where would Mayhem set up shop? I guess he must have had an office back when he was Roy's right hoof stallion, but I never did find it.

So that left me... where exactly.

“Hired Gun?” Blinking, I turned. There, standing before the fake bathroom door that really led to a secret elevator, was the old bartender. Only now he was decked out in a battle saddle and fancy suit. I really should have gotten around to remembering his name. “We'll I'll be a minotaur's uncle. I heard you got killed!” Wait, really? “How have ya been, girl? Where's your filly anyway? Heck, soon as I saw ya I immediately started thinking that I should grab you some sparkle-colas.” The unicorn chuckled. “Good to see you well... well, mostly well. Nice eyepatch, real sporting.”

“Hired Gun has friends,” High Stakes remarked, half-shocked, “I must be dreaming.”

“Ignore him.” I waved my metal hoof at the annoying green unicorn. “I need to see Mayhem.”

“Mayhem is a busy stallion, but I'll see what I can do. He was mighty upset when he heard you died and has been dying ta talk with ya. Can't tell you why, but hey, give me a second.” The unicorn backed off and spoke into his hoof. Seemed to be a common thing for ponies to do these days.

A few minutes of hushed chatter later and he came walking back up. “Says you're okay for a chat.”

“Where is he?”

“Why, The Room of course.” Only Mayhem would make an interrogation room his personal office. I stepped towards the door, “Now wait just a tick. Only you can go, not your friends. Ya dig?” I blinked. “Listen, he doesn't really trust you. Can you blame him? So just you, your friends are welcome to the many amenities The Moon has to offer as they wait. I have some vouchers for free drinks and dances if they want.”

“Whatever.” I turned to Flare and Stakes. “Don't get too drunk without me.”

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The sterile white hallway that led to The Room was just as I remembered it. Back during those days when I worked for the Mustangs I had walked the same walk many times. Though then, I was in a position of power. Now, though, I was gunless and mostly in Mayhem's power. I licked my lips and kept walking. The lights above were outrageously bright, and made the whole hallway shiny. Did it really have to be so long though? I could feel my heart pounding harder with every step. Something between a combination of being worried for Serenity, nervous about what Mayhem wanted me for, and frustrated with everything that had happened.

You know what? Fuck that. If Mayhem tried anything, I'd kill him like I killed Roy.

I stormed past the two guards standing right outside the door and entered The Room. It wasn't exactly as I remembered. It was still obscenely white, but the single table had a large terminal on it now, and was mostly covered in documents. Mayhem, who was sitting on a cushion, looked up from the computer screen at me. Sighing, he flicked the monitor off. “Hired Gun. It seems the rumours of your demise are unfounded.”

I...” The door clicked behind me. It locked from the outside. “I suppose so.”

“Considering I started them, it is not a surprise.” I... wait what? “I was hoping Molly would have killed you. It'd make waving away Roy's death that much easier.” He wasn't making much sense. “Some think I hired you to kill him, so it would be easier if you were dead... and yes I know it was you. It's the worst kept secret in Dise. For the time, anyway.”

“How do you-”

“Spies. And then spies watching the spies. Any gang leader worth their salt has an extensive network watching everypony else's business.” The red stallion smirked. “So, of course, Roy had none. It took me a couple days to modify my existing network, but the first word I heard was about a large mare seen near the scene with a huge gun. You, of course. Still you did get one thing right. No pony has any idea why you killed him.”

“Let's keep it that way.”

“Of course.” He stood up. For some reason he seemed a bit thinner than I last remembered him. Still large, just not as much. And his... woah! From around his left knee down was replaced with metal. It wasn't skeletal like my leg, but instead rounded and more like an actual ponies leg, only, you know, cybernetic.

“That's my style.” I said plainly as he started to pace.

“Hah, well too bad. The thing is new too.” He stretched it. “Waited too long to take a healing potion. By the time I tried, most of my leg was too fucked up. Didn't need to amputate but limping would just incite someone to usurp me. So I hired a Watcher doctor and Cerberus cybernetic tech to come in and do it. Bitch is hard to get used to, and it burns sometimes, but apparently that's normal.”

“Cerberus?”

“The other cybernetic company.” He smirked. “Couldn't very well have my rival work on my leg could I? Hear the Cerberus clowns came from some stable up in Equestria. The one I talked to was a new recruit but apparently the founders were all earth ponies, and had a different tech design. More efficient than house could ever dream of.” He smirked. “Stables, apparently they did one thing right.” He laughed bitterly. “Sorry. They have me on painkillers. Apparently they have a side effect of making me a jabbering idiot.” Strange, Med-x never did that for me. “What exactly is it that you wanted?”

The pleasure of your company, of course. “I heard you know something.”

“Know lots of things.”

“About the vanishing foals.” He raised an eyebrow before smirking.

“So they got Serenity.” I winced. “Now how did you let her go? Normally, you are so protective.” There was a smirk on his face I didn't like. “Maybe I know something about her...” He started circling the table. Slowly and methodically. “Maybe I could help you find her. Maybe. Then again, you did kill my boss...”

“You mean,” I corrected, my voice expressing my barely contained rage. “I gave you your job.”

“Aye. That you did.” He kept circling until he started walking around me. I knew the tactic well enough so I didn't bother following his path, and instead stared at the papers on his desk. Imagine that, sensitive information just waiting for me to read. I idly wondered how much of it was planted information. I was stupid, but I wasn't stupid enough to think he'd leave vital information on his desk like that. Mayhem looked like a large tub of stupid, but he was annoyingly smart. “But you still killed Roy. You have upset some important ponies. I could sell you to Molly a-”

“No. If you tried, I'd smash your head in. Besides.” I rested my head on the table. I was not in the mood for these stupid games he always felt like playing. Serenity was somewhere and I had to banter words with this fuck-head. “You wouldn't sell me to your enemy.”

“And how do-”

“Molly still wants The Moon. You aren't going to give her anything. Stop fucking around.” I grit my teeth and tried to calm my tightening muscles. Every fibre in my being was telling me to beat him. “You won't sell me. Not to the Baises. Not to House. Not to the Galicians. Not to the NCA. All of them hate you more than me. I'm a fly. You're a poisonous snake. I can be ignored, but to them, your gifts would be tainted.” Great, now I was giving animal metaphors like Molly. “Just tell me what you want. What price. I'll pay it. I need your information.”

Mayhem made a tut tutting noise at me. “You know how this room works. Interrogation, beatings, ruin ponies' sense or worth and entitlement.” There was a smirk behind me before he started walking around some more. “The rules still apply. Don't make me have to break you. This room has met tougher opponents and won, ya dig?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “There is a difference.” I lifted my head up. “Something you had before, that you don't have now. Something that let you get what you wanted. Something that could break ponies.” He raised an eyebrow, begging me to continue. “You had me.”

“Aye. I need a new stupid mare to scare folk. So what is it you wanted again?” Fucking fucker mother

fuck fuck. I played your game of words, now just tell me what I wanted to know. “Right the missing foals. Well I got a new shipment of foals two days ago.” I winced. “Don't worry. They'll be trained to be guards and given freedom. Roy had some fillies in the sex trade but... well, I may be a horrible evil bastard, but I would never go that far.” Right. No killing Mayhem for child slavery. Not yet anyway. “I had them running drills in the alley outside. And by drills I mean tag.” Huh. Tag? “It teaches foals many important skills. Strength, speed, agility, teamwork, that sort of thing. Blind Spot went missing, and some kids reported seeing a flash.”

Was that it? How long had I spent down here for that little tidbit of shit! Really! Fucking really! Serenity was missing, and that's all the information. I... calm. Silver. Just calm down. Don't rush headlong. Calm for fuck's sake.

“Is that it?” Okay. I did not sound calm. And maybe I was shaking. Just a little bit. I don't think he noticed.

“No...” Tell me. Tell me. Tell me! “But. Information is not cheap. If you want me to tell you, well I need something in return. A promise. A contract. That someday, maybe tomorrow, maybe in a year, you'll help me. No questions asked. No matter what it is.”

I slammed my hooves down so hard they cracked the table. “Even I am not that stupid.” My rage bubbled to the surface, and I had to bite my lip to keep my voice down. “I won't agree to that. I. You could make me do. Anything! At any time. I am not that stupid. It's too vague. I-”

“Hired.” He smirked at me, leaning against the wall non-nonchalantly. “You and I both know you will take the deal. Because Serenity is on the line.” My metal hoof cracked down slamming through his table. Not to show my defiance, but because he was right. I was going to take the offer. Serenity was out there... somewhere, with someone. I choked back tears. I had to be strong. Until I found her. Just a little bit longer.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Yeah. Fuck you.”

“I just knew you'd see it my way.” He walked over to his table and tut tutted at the hole I put through it before swiping the fake documents away. “Now, I suppose I could make you sign a contract, but well, you have been getting a reputation for always following the word of the contract. Just the word though. Do you know how to combat that?” I shrugged. “Be really vague or really specific. If you agree to this, you are agreeing to accept a single job from me without question in the future.” I nodded. “Good.”

“Now tell me.” I barked. Well. I didn't really bark, but it is the closest approximation to the sound of my voice at that point in time. “What. Do. You. Know.”

“Patience. Well, after one of my foals vanished I had to find out who took him. And no, he did not just escape.” I wasn't thinking that.... “They came to me slaves, I let them play tag and gave them food. Moving on. I am nothing if not thorough. So I sent my little ponies out to investigate. It seems to have started a few nights ago. Vanishing colts and fillies, sometimes flashes of lights. Only orphans or slaves though... not sure how your daughter was mistaken.”

“Get. To the point.” I was tired of trying to match wits with him, so I just glared.

“You know there are ponies living under Dise right.” I blinked. “For serious? Fuck.” Wait. That sounded familiar. I was sure I heard something like that before. “I hate having to explain this shit, look. Way back before the world blew up some crazy ass idiot created a huge series of tunnels under Dise. Supposed to be large enough to hold the entire city at it's peak, but it didn't work. I mean, it withstood the blast partially but wasn't much protection against radiation. Ya dig? Ponies died, yadda yadda, but more importantly is a lot of the facilities still work. So there are a lot of tribes and villages down there that trade with the surface.” But the tunnels I was in didn't seem... livable. Also, it was full of crazy.

“Some feral ghoul attacks, but safer than the surface. Entrances are sprinkled throughout the city, but all of them in Dise are held by an important faction so ponies don't use it to smuggle.” Talk more; you're not boring at all. “Fact of the matter is some of the villages have been... talking.”

“About?”

“Shut up. I'm trying to help you.” No. You are just telling me so you can blackmail me in the future. “Strange occurrences and these flashes of light. Same thing as before, ya dig? This tells me that something is down there. Something that is kidnapping these foals.”

That was. Something. I felt a spark of hope rise in my chest. It was a lead. It was something I could latch onto. I had to follow this until the end. Somehow I knew it was the only lead I was going to get, and I wasn't going to let it go.

“I... thank you.” I backed away from the table, and turned to walk away.

“I am not done.” I tilted my head back. The red stallion seemed to be enjoying himself way too much. “Here.” On the table he pushed over a map with some notes scrawled on it. “Directions to the village that saw the flash. Clues, maybe.” He smirked as I rolled it up and stuffed the map in my saddle bags. “And this.” He pressed something under the table.

And the wall started moving.

Wait, what? The white wall he was standing in front of cracked, and slowly started to rise into the air. As the door rose slowly, dust and paint chips falling off it, I could see a small room on the other side with a staircase. At first I thought it made no sense, but then I used my head. I knew Wallkirk built the tunnels to save ponies (even if he failed hilariously), and I knew that at least one other hotel had a secret exit (The Ale House, of course), and I also knew that the major factions personally controlled the entrances to the tunnels. So seeing this one here in The Room, which I knew was underground, shouldn't have been a surprise. I should have expected. Then again, I was not a clever pony (if you don't believe me ask Post Haste).

“Well. That's convenient.”

“If Molly ever attacks again, it most certainly will be.” Mayhem grinned deviously at me. Somehow I knew I played exactly into his hoof, but I didn't know how.

Nodding, I started forward to the hidden stairs. “Mayhem. Do me a favour. My companions will miss me. Tell them. Also. Make sure they don't get too drunk without me.” he nodded.

So, I took a deep breath, closed my eye, and descend back into the tunnels. Already I could hear the winds whispering in my ears. I never asked for this... for either of us...

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*Silver.* I heard a voice whisper in my ear.

Just calm down. Oh. I was just thinking to myself. Yes. Calm, Silver. Just because you were in a tunnel didn't make it the tunnels. Look at the differences.

Right. First of all was the fact that the tunnel I was in actually had working lights strung up on the walls. This gave me the lovely ability to see without making shadows dance around me. Secondly, would be the fact that there was no mysterious wind, and when I closed my eye I wasn't transported into an inescapable dream. Right. Just think about this rationally. Which was all well in good if I was a rational pony.

Of course, I wasn't. So every three seconds I snapped my head to the right, making sure no pony was sneaking up on my blind sport, and every minute or so I needed to take a deep breath. If I'd a choice, I

would never go underground again. Never ever. But... well, something under here stole Serenity. Nothing under Dise was good, so I was going to find it and kick its ass. Even if the tunnels made me a tad nervous. I just needed to get over it.

Fear was all well and good, but I was better than that. Just keep moving forward, stupid. You're just worked up over Serenity vanishing. The tunnels don't scare you. I mean, I disliked them, but they weren't scary. Just needed to calm myself down. Fuck the tunnels. If they got in my way, I would kick them the fuck down.

So I stormed through the quiet tunnels. I would have felt better with Subtlety on my back (and my right eye in my socket), but I had to go with what I had. My hooves clacked loudly against the metal grate, and somewhere I could hear dripping water. It wasn't as creepy as the darkness of that tunnel, but it had its own charm. For example, it had a subtle mildew scent that never seemed to leave. Almost as if it was following me, and every once in a while something would drip on my head making me almost jump.

The walls were still creepy. Whatever tunnel I was in had the metal grate that served as a floor cleaned, but the walls told the truth. It was lined with centuries old stains of indeterminable origins. The moldy brown sometimes nearly wrote words, but were so faded it was hard to see. However, there were some words carved into the stone that I could see. "Celestia, help me." wrote one. "We're dying, save us" wrote another. "The tunnels were never meant to save anypony" yet a third carved note said. The final will of ponies who have been long dead, forever immortalized in stone.

Apparently, tunnels made me thoughtful and morose... very thoughtful, considering I just used morose in a sentence. If only Serenity were here to hear me be so verbose. Oh! There, I did it again.

Right. Apparently being nervous turned my intelligence chip into overdrive. Or perhaps thinking about Serenity made me subconsciously remember some of the more impressive words she used... or I just got lucky twice in a row. Or maybe I was getting off topic.

Just to make sure I knew where I was going I pulled out the map from one of the pockets in my barding, and rolled it out on the floor. Right, so If I started at this 'X' and walked... how many doors did I pass? I was. Somewhere. I looked around, then back at my map, then around again. Well... I guess this was a good time to realize that I didn't know how to read maps. I mean, I thought it was easy. Look at map. Instantly gain knowledge. Apparently there was a part where you had to decipher the map and stuff.

Fuck.

Well, this can't be too hard. So, after I packed up my map, I kept walking. I mean I was looking for, what? A little underground village of surface hating ponies. Or... something. Either way, it shouldn't be that hard to find my way to it. All I had to do was follow the screams.

Wait, screams?

Fucking screams. It seemed in my worried daze I completely missed the fact that somepony was screaming!

I dashed down the hall, following my ears. Quickly, I turned right, slamming through a wooden door with my head (What? Not like it could damage my brain anymore), and into a small hallway. That shrill scream sounded again, further down the hall way. One more doorway, and I seemed to have found the voice.

She was standing in the middle of a rather large, empty, dirty brown room. I didn't get much of a look at her as I was paying more attention to the swarm of radscorpions. Right, it was Hero ti-

There was a flash so bright I had to close my eye and cut off my epic rescue. When I opened my eye again the rad scorpions were suddenly tied up in a giant net hanging from the ceiling. Standing smugly before them was a black suited pony with a mask covering her entire face. "Have no fear, Citizen. I am here to help." The Batmare said, turning to the mare who had been attacked.

The brown mare didn't answer though as she was pointing a frightened hoof in my direction. Wait. She didn't think I was a bad guy o-

KAPOW!

A sudden kick to the head sent me staggering to the side. My shoulder flared in protest, but when I turned to see what hit me it was gone. Dammit, The Batmare was using her fancy teleporting tricks and... my shoulder was burning again. I tried to turn, but for some reason my leg faltered, reacting slower than it should have.

URKKK!

Argh, there was a sudden weight on my back, and something mashed into the top of my skull. Reeling in pain I tried to buck her off of me, but she was surprisingly strong. "Surrender now, evil doer, and face justice!" Take your justice and shove it up your ass. With a growl I dropped and rolled and the mare vanished off, making my shoulder sting.

ZOK!

Batmare's hoof just nicked my forehead as I managed to pull back just in time. I noticed that my shoulder started to burn right before she appeared. Heh. There is no way she'd be expecting that from an earth pony. As The Batmare tried for another kick, I stepped away and tried to give her one of my own, only for her to, predictably, disappear.

CLUNK!

Her foot slammed hard into the stone floor, missing me completely. Before she had a chance to realize I could predict her attacks, I turned and slammed my back legs into her with a powerful KRUNCH!

She flew through the air but vanished before hitting the wall. Only to reappear in nearly the same spot she vanished, just standing upright. "You are no amateur villain. Tell me who you work for! Is it the Laughing Stallion? The Cat Walker? Mr. House? Or are you alone, here to spread vileness and evil for your own mysterious purpose. It matters not, for I Am The Batmare!"

"Wait, I-

And she was gone again.

SWOOSH!

I ducked just in time to dodge the blow. Gritting my teeth I turned to my right to face her, but she started circling me. Trying to stay in my blind side no doubt. For fuck's sake, I didn't even want to fight this whack--"Fuck" I cried out stumbling to the side as she bucked me hard in the ribs. "Will you stop. I'm not a-" She flashed her horn and vanished again. Argh, this was getting irritating.

Wait, Idea.

Ignoring the burning in my shoulder as she appeared behind me, I charged forward. The bag of rad scorpions was hanging from the ceiling. Leaping up I grabbed the rope holding them up, and snapped it. As I slammed into the ground I twirled my head around, swinging the bag of poisonous creatures like a flail.

My shoulder burned. I don't know how, but I could always tell where the magic was coming from. So

when she appeared to my right I was ready. I slammed my improvised weapon into her, and let go. The force sent her tumbling to the ground, smothered in writhing giant insects.

She laid dazed just long enough for me to say, "Stop that. I am not your enemy. And." I pointed around the empty room. "That other pony left already."

Another flash. Oh for fuck's sake.

Except instead she flashed in front of me, far enough away that she clearly wasn't trying to hurt. "Gone you say? Hah, my apologies." Hey! What happened to the epic voice of truth and justice? "It is necessary to keep up my facade long enough for them to leave, I did not think you were a threat, but it is about appearance. She thought you were scary, so I fought you."

"I... what?"

"Now tell me," She said beneath her mask, "What are you doing down here? You are clearly not known. If you are a criminal vagabond, I shall be forced to continue my righteous beat down." Beat down? I was winning there! I mean sure I got kicked hard a few times, but... shut up. She cheated with her stupid unicorn powers. And I still was making a come back... with my own mysterious magic like powers.

"I am looking for..." I furrowed my brow. How was I supposed to explain what Serenity was to me. I don't suppose 'random orphan I picked up and subsequently scared away by killing another kid' would work for Ms. Truth and Justice. So I gave the response you're all waiting for, "my daughter."

Was she smirking? I couldn't tell under her mask. "Yes, another taken by the dastardly child snatcher." She started to pace, pausing briefly time to time so she could pose. "I have heard tales. The most innocent and helpless of orphans stolen by this evil creature. They say he is ten feet tall and shoots lightning from his eyes. Few have gotten a good look, but many have traced him to this very tunnel! I am getting close. I have an inkling that the Laughing Stallion might be behind these abductions, but I cannot be sure. If you wish to help me, please leave. This is no job for amateurs." Ama-what? I'll show you amateur.

"I'm not a-" I stopped speaking when she winked away. Unicorns, bah.

Still, when I felt a dull burning in my shoulder I followed it. Stupid superheros weren't allowed to insult me and get away with it. I slammed though a nearby door, and into another dimly light dirt hallway. Followed by another one, bringing me into one of the large hallways.

Batmare stood there, staring blankly at me. Obviously, she must not have figured out my super special, and not suspicious at all, powers. "How did you find me so quickly?"

"Magic. Listen. I'm coming with you. Serenity is missing. I am going to find her."

"You are truly a pony with honesty and justice in your heart! I shall gladly take you on as a sidekick for this mission."

Sidekick? Really?

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The tunnels were endless. They sprawled along in every direction, stretching out in patterns I could barely understand. It was like a giant maze, made all the more confusing by the numerous cave ins and passages rendered impassable by debris. How the Batmare knew where she was going at all confused me, but somehow she kept walking, so I followed. The wanna-be super hero was not one for chit-chat, and I wasn't sure that was a good thing.

Eventually, she did say something. "You are a good fighter. Well, tough at least. It was lucky I

recognized you from before. Twas the leg, an uncommon make even in Dise. Otherwise I would have laid you flat instead of taking it easy.” I had to roll my eyes at that statement. Sure she was going to try to save face even after I smacked her upside the head with a bag full of rad scorpions. I made a mental note to never forget that.

“Right.”

“You believe me not? A shame. Perhaps I should change my mind about you being my sidekick.” Please do.

“What are you?” She stopped and turned her masked face to me. So I continued, even though she was tapping her foot against the metal grate in annoyance. “The costume. The act. That stupid, stupid voice. I don't understand.”

“If you must know.” Sure, why not. I love backstories. She continued on walking, so I followed. “I was inspired during my travels across equestria. In manehatten I found long forgotten stories of somepony known as 'Mare Do Well.’” That was a stupid name. “When times were tense, and ponies troubled, she came as a beacon of justice. She fought evil, thwarted zebra plots, and saved innocent ponies. When I finally reached this city I looked upon it and saw a swarming, pus-filled shit hole so full of crime that law itself was outlawed. So I became a law unto myself. Following Mare Do Well, I struck back at the evil. A beacon of hope for this beleaguered city. I am here to give the citizens that hope.”

“So...” We turned a corner. If I'd been paying attention to where I was walking I wouldn't have stumbled on a shattered statue lying in front of a wooden door. Looking down, I kicked at it in annoyance before looking up at the door. There was a centuries old plaque on the door that said 'Wall'. Right, apparently the door had multiple personality disorder.

“So...” I continued, having briefly forgotten that I was talking. “Your parents didn't die and drive you crazy or anything?” I mean the whole 'inspiration' thing was dandy, if a tad strange, but it was the wasteland. Her story wasn't nearly tragic enough.

“Well, yes,” she admitted, “but that is hardly relevant.” Honestly, the dead parents story seemed far more interesting. If Flare was here he'd tell the story right. And then, I don't know, report my reactions to Sky Fall. Apparently.

Though I could have brought him and High Stakes with me. I mean, they were waiting upstairs in the casino, so it wouldn't have been much to convince Mayhem... why didn't I think of that?! I mean I know I was a stupid pony, but that was just ridiculous. With their combined, uh, talents it would have been that much easier to find Serenity.

I sighed. Serenity. Somewhere down in these cold, dank tunnels. Taken by somepony. I was trying my best not to think about, not to worry, but... well I was bad at that. Each step seemed to twist my stomach more and more. There was a pounding in the back of my head as I thought about it, warning me of who might have taken her. Reminding me that it was my fault for letting her go... for forcing her to go. I meant for her to be safe, but I fucked that up.

Urgh, whining wasn't going to get me anywhere. Just needed to calm down.

“You seem troubled.” The costumed crusader said, not bothering to look back at me.

“This thing. Whoever has been... foalnapping. Do you know what it is?” I doubted she did, but the sound of talking would distract me from the omnipresence of my failure.

“I cannot truly say,” she said after a moment of silence. “Whatever it is, it is magical. It started three days ago. Orphans mostly, but I have heard talk of slaves being freed.” Yes, one of Mayhem's was taken. That made no sense to me. If somepony was trying to do something horrible, it made sense to

take orphans. Who would miss them? But slaves, that seemed odd. If they went missing somepony would notice. Maybe I was overthinking this.

“In either case,” The Batmare continued, “The figure what took them has been seen but rarely. Descriptions vary but two things are known for certain. Firstly: whatever it is, it is of a monstrous size. Comparisons have been made to being at least as tall as a minotaur. Secondly: whatever it is, flashes of light are always seen nearby when it shows up.”

“Thirdly, it's in these tunnels?” I asked.

“Maybe.” That felt like a buck to the chest. What have I been doing these past few hours if she wasn't actually near by! I had to be sure, each second we wasted she could be... “But there is a good chance. Many have spoken of flashes of lights, though no children from the villages have been taken.” Right, villages. I have heard ponies lived in these tunnels, but apart from The Batmare and that one pony we saved, I'd seen none. Of course the tunnels were designed to hold everypony in Celestia's Paradise at it's peak, so it wasn't that shocking. That was a lot of space for so few.

“Well... what if it was you?”

She stopped in the middle of a T shaped intersection and shook her head. Either that or she was deciding which way to go. “No, I rarely go down here.” Yet she knew her way well. “And when I do, I rarely teleport, save for instances of battle.” I guess that made sense. Magic couldn't have been easy so she would want to conserve her... magic, swirly glowing... energy... stuff. “This way.” She turned right.

I followed after. The tunnels were getting dirtier I noticed. The ceiling above looked to be caked with... something, and every few steps I would splash into something really gross. If nothing else it was proof that destiny did not want me to bathe as it always sent me into dirty places right after I did so.

“Are you sure it's-” I stopped. My shoulder was burning. It was light, but it was still there. “Yes. We're going the right way.”

“How would you know?” The Batmare questioned.

“Magic.” I closed my eyes, and focused on my shoulder. The tingling of the scar tissue under the metal plate felt so real, so alive. It didn't burn, but I could feel something. I had never felt residual magic like this before. Even under the tunnels I didn't sense the magic until I was close to the orb. Whatever made this was really powerful, or really careless. “I can feel it.” My heart was beating more and more. Something ludicrously powerful had taken Serenity, and I wasn't sure I could stop them.

I banished the thought from my head. I couldn't... remembering would just hurt. I could do it this time. There was no other option. But my mind kept going back to what Elder Chunky Soup told me. “There is a darkness under Dise. Something black and squirming and begging to be let free.”

I opened my eye. Sweat drenched my chest at the thought. I don't know what Elder Soup was talking about, but a highly powerful magical thing stealing children seemed black and squirming to me.

“We need to hurry.” I ran.

I let my instincts guide me as the dirty tunnel flashed by in a blur. Somehow, I knew Batmare was following, but I couldn't care less. When I turned, slammed through a door, and fell thirty feet onto the rubble of what used to be a staircase, I barely even stopped. I knew they had come this way. So I kept running. I think I was bleeding, but I wasn't sure. There was a sudden spike of fire through my shoulder making me stop, as The Batmare appeared beside me.

“Don't do that!” I said too loud. Though I barely heard my words over my pounding heart.

“What? Why not, it is the only way I can keep up.” I looked around. The lights were still on at this

level, but more and more were broken. The walls were so dirty they seemed almost black, and there was an overpowering smell that I could not place.

“The magic is faint. Your magic cancels it. Makes me lose the...” The what? The burn? The signal? The feed? I was not a smart enough pony to even figure out where the burning came from, never mind use proper words to describe it. It seemed to be enough, though, as she nodded. Saying no more, I took off down the dark hallway.

It got darker as I ran. This was not a good thing. I no longer liked dark hallways much, but I kept running. How could I not? Serenity's life was in danger by something presumably black and squirming. Dammit, and it was all my fault. I could only pray to Celestia that I wasn't too late.

I slammed through a door, ran three steps, then stopped.

The dank hallway vanished, and suddenly everything was... clean. The walls all looked freshly scrubbed, and every light was glowing. My shoulder was burning fully too, and I knew that Batmare beside me wasn't using any of her magic. So I stopped running, and spoke in a hushed whisper. “We are close.”

We inched past doors, most closed. The one that was open went into a room with a series of small beds laid out in a row. My heart started pounding more and more as I inched closer in the complex.

There.

A solid wooden door. I could feel, something. I inched closer and stuck my ear up to -- quickly realized I used my stubby ear -- I turned my head around and used the other. Muffled voices spoke on the other side. Whatever took Serenity. Right behind this door. I licked my lips.

“On three.” I said to Batmare. “One.” My heart pounded against the door. “Two.” Another heart beat, I took a breath. “Th-” There was a familiar burning sensation. Wait. I knew that feeling.

Serenity!

The door shattered into splinters as I charged, then skidded to a stop. Standing in front of me was a... I wasn't sure. She was taller than any pony I'd ever seen, but thin and majestic. Her deep blue coat seemed to shimmer, and her hair was strange. It seemed to flow in waves of toxic purple and green. Her horn too, seemed too large even for her size, and her wings... wait, wings? Holy shit I was staring face to face at an alicorn. I was so stunned by her beauty I couldn't even completely my attack. “Celestia.” The Alicorn took a step back when I heard.

“Momma?”

I turned my head so hard my neck almost snapped. Rows of foals sitting at a table, but they didn't matter. Only Serenity, who was staring at me, tears forming in her large grey eyes. Slowly I turned back to the alicorn, who seemed to be glaring, and then to the wall she was standing in front of. It was a strange green board with strange jumbled symbols filling it. Was this alicorn teaching Serenity some sort of evil, alicorn magic stuff!? I had to stop her and sa-

My thought process was cut off by a soft popping sound.

Suddenly smoke filled the room. Dimly I could hear the sounds of coughing children as I rubbed my eye, trying to see. Everything was a grey mist. Then there was a quick purple flash, a sound of a kick. Batmare, she was fighting, no wai-

Pain. The burning sensation in my shoulder exploded so violently I cried out.

Something slammed into me and I fell. The Batmare was on top of me groaning. That was a bad place to be.

As quickly as the smoke came it twirled away with another burst of pain to my shoulder. The Batmare winked away leaving me lying on the floor, the cat like eyes of an alicorn glaring down at me, her horn glowing ominously. Fuck. I was so fucked. I had to save Serenity, I had to get up, but when I tried her heavy hoof pushed me down. I was stronger, I could overpower her! I...

“No!” Serenity cried. I could hear hoofsteps before I saw her beside me. “Don't hurt her! Please, she's my... don't...” Why was she crying? I was here to save her; she should be happy.

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“...math?” I repeated. The giant alicorn nodded once again. After the incident, the alicorn bundled me up in her magic and took me to a small (I had to assume) infirmary. Guessing by the number of boxes with three butterflies on them and the white cot I was lying on anyway. Turns out the fall earlier had cracked the bone on my left back leg. Thankfully I got a healing potion before the injury could set.

“Yes.” the alicorn said. “Long division to be exact.” She had a haunting voice that seemed to reverberate through the room. And I'm not even sure what that means.

“Never heard of it.” The Batmare probably knew what long division was, but she vanished after her failed attempt at fighting... fighting... whatever her name was. “What's your name?”

“I am...” She paused, her muzzle scrunching up for a second. “Platinum Haze. Yes. You must forgive me. It is a new name, and sometimes I struggle to remember it.” Err, what?

“How is the name new?” Was it a made up name like Hired Gun? Was she running from something too?

“It... well, it is not.” She looked puzzled. “But it is. Alicorns are different. Were different. It was my name before I joined the song of Unity, and it has become my name once more.” Did that make sense to anypony? Ever? “Now, though, you must tell me your name in exchange, and why you have smashed your way into my home.”

“I...” Argh, my stupid eyeball was throbbing. The one that was torn up, anyway. “I am Hired Gun. You stole my filly. So I came for her.”

“Yes,” She smiled just a bit. “This I already have knowledge of. I found her upon the street last night, crying and cold. So I took her unto my care, and she spoke of you with some heat. Though after a time she softened.” Great, I am sure she told this child loving alicorn about Post Haste. No doubt I was about to get a beating. Oh well, I could take her. “Tell me,” Haze continued, “Why did you do it?”

“It was a job.”

“I do not believe you.” She shook her head (her mane didn't shake like a normal mane due to the wavy-ness). “For when I spoke to Serenity, she did not believe you. There is a test, if you will, to verify the validity of this statement.” I what.

“Listen. I know what I did. And why. I am a bad pony. Bad ponies need caps. I took a job for caps. Piss off.” I don't care if she was some beautiful demi-goddess. She was bothering me and my delicate sensibilities.

“I promised your filly I would try. She is determined you are not at all what you try to be, and thusly, to ease her mind, I promised. It is a simple test. A memory spell, to let me see what you saw as you saw it. It takes but a second.” No. No way was I letting a strange alicorn into my mind. Never. “Though to be truthful, she did not expect you to search for her. Not at first. She seemed positive you did not care, but from the stories she told I knew you would come... perhaps not in that manner, but such is the way of things.”

“Of course I would come,” I said softly looking away. “Fine.” I sighed, and rested my head upon the bed. Idly, I wondered if this counted under the 'Silver does something stupid and gets captured' rule. “How does this work? I tell you something. You magic up if it's the truth? Or... it doesn't matter.” I sat up on the bed. “I want to ask you some questions first.”

Platinum Haze looked down at me with a smile. Her eyes were very... something. I wasn't sure if they frightened me, or if they were just really pretty. Perhaps a little bit of both. “Of course, whatever to put you at ease. I know you must have had a rough day.” No. You really couldn't know that. But thanks for pretending.

“Who... no sorry. What are you? Why are you here? What the fuck is going on down here?”

“I am an alicorn,” She said simply. Right, because I couldn't tell that. But that really made no sense, I mean as far as I knew only goddesses were alicorns (unless you counted Starscream). “It is... difficult to explain. I was not always as you see me. There was... a spell, and magic, and a song. It is... fuzzy but I was turned into this and joined Unity.”

“Unity?”

“Yes, that is what I said.” Was she mocking me? Given the regal way she spoke I wasn't quite sure. “It was... a collective of minds. With... it matters not. We were all one, once and now we are separate. It is hard to get used to, but it is better to not dwell.”

“So what happened?” I regretted asking. Turns out I didn't actually care. She could at least try to make the story interesting.

“The Goddess exploded.” Wait, Celestia? She exploded? But she's a... a goddess. Those can't die as far as I knew (though since they can't die I imagined they could explode twice). “Unity was broken and I remembered...” She scrunched up her muzzle. “Things. It matters not. Confused, I joined... a different pony who promised us we would be able to find mates.” Mates? As in male alicorns or... what? Actually, I don't want to know.

“He was killed by the same pony that killed the goddess.” I am sensing a pattern. Whoever that pony was she sure liked fucking super powerful goddess type beings around. “We learned. So we sided with a friend of the Destroyer. A mare named Velvet Remedy. She was not like The Destroyer. She promised to help us find mates and bring in a new wasteland. We are called the Followers Of The Apocalypse.” There was a hint of a smirk at that. “Velvet wanted to get a start at building a new world. At least preparations. It was my idea to bring a wing here, it was my home once and I thought it would be a good place to start... Velvet agreed, though I wish she hadn't.”

“So. You came here and stole orphans.”

“Rescued. We were given many caps and have the skills to acquire more. We attempted to enter the city legally but were shot on sight...” She sighed. “Diamond Sky and I survived and found our way through the tunnels. We found the remains of a schooling area and are refurbishing it to our needs. We have tried to speak with adults of this city, but most scream, shoot or... bite. So we have taken to gathering foals who are more open and teaching them. It is not exactly what Velvet wanted, but it is hard in this city.”

“That's stupid.” And I knew stupid. “Go into cities, teach them. I mean...” I understood the intent, I suppose. The sky was clear, let's rebuild, but... whoever thought of the plan must have been naive. “Whatever...”

She laughed prettily, before turning to make sure the door was locked. I took the time to get a good look at her, trying to get a sense of what she was, but for some reason my eyes kept falling on her

rump... oh fuck, not this again. Feeling my cheeks heat up, I turned my sight away. This was not the time or place to crush on majestic, otherworldly, beautiful... stop that. Not a fillyfooler. Bad Silver. I needed to take a cold shower.

“Whatever is the matter?” She asked so simply, but I blushed more and kept looking away. Is it gay if it's with a goddess?

Okay, that was a stupid question. “Nothing.” I lied. This wasn't the time. At all. I found Serenity. She was safe, and soon I needed to get back to wallowing in self pity. “Do your memory thing.”

“Don't thou wish to learn how the spell works? It is fairly tricky an-”

“Just.” I turned my head back to her, doing my best to glare. “Do it.” Haze looked concerned for a moment before nodding. In seconds her horn became engulfed in a brilliant blue glow. Slowly, she lowered her (very large [not in that way]) horn and touched my forehead. There was a shocking sense of pain in my shoulder before everything went black.

There was no sound in the blackness. No light. Just an endless void leaving me engulfed and restricted. A rising sense of terror took over me as I realized how trapped I was. Even when I tried to struggle it was as if I'd no body... because I didn't.

*Do not panic.*

A voice said in the darkness, reverberating through the inky blackness of my world.

*This will not hurt. Relax, and let me see*

I relaxed but not before regretting going into this stupid magical world. There was a white spot in the distance. Ever so slowly the white spot grew and grew until it engulfed me. Because it was me. A few minutes ago staring at Haze's...

*Oh my...*

Oh Fuck. Was she laughing at me? Stop laughing at me, goddess alicorn magical voice thing! Damn it. Time reversed again, and suddenly I was back fighting The Batmare. My senses were all there, but my thoughts at the time were missing, and all my feelings were dulled. Especially the burning in my shoulder, which seemed to have vanished completely.

A whoosh and I was back in the showering feeling miserable. I felt myself standing up and shaking the water off before walking out. Huh... I didn't quite remember taking a Med-X then.

Suddenly, my soul was torn from my body, and time reversed again, flashing back even further to when I was talking to Mr. House. Back again to the Vertibuck ride. Back, and back, and back until I was standing in the room back in Karkhoof.

Subtlety hung dully on my back, and I was scanning the the camp again. This memory. How I hated it. I could feel my mouth moving, but once again there were no words attached. The world was soundless but I knew the words by heart. I felt myself leaning down to bite the bridle of my battle saddle. Then I felt the strangest things. Tears in my eyes. I didn't remember crying, but I was. Even before I had shot I had already hated myself. I am not sure what that proved.

I bit the bridle, the shot swayed by Serenity's weight, and the foal died. I had replayed this memory too many times. A few tears changed none of this.

*So she was right,* The voice boomed as the memory played, *she did affect the shot.*

What.

No. No no no no, she did not! I wasn't sure if she could hear me, but my mind screamed out to her, trying to explain it wasn't Serenity's fault the shot moved. It was mine. Did she really set this up just to prove it wasn't my fault... or did she... did she feel guilty for what happened? That made no sense. This was.

*I am sorry for tricking you. She had to be sure... and she can be very convincing.*

Get out.

*Yes... I...*

What was going on. The time was flashing back again to the battle with the land sharks. I could see Dragonslayer (note to self: you still need to kill him) glaring at me again. What the hell was going on?

*I... this has never happened before. The voice said. I can fix this. Give me a minute*

Had she even done this before?

*O-only once. Reverberating voices shouldn't stutter! My magical abilities were quite limited in Unity. These spells are tricky, and I have had little time to learn an-*

We flashed back again. Fix it! Fix it already!

She didn't and stopped speaking. We kept going back and back, living out minutes at a time. There was Elder Chunky Soup talking cryptically. There was the soccer game. The tunnels. The Batmare. Roy Mustang's death. Time kept spiralling backwards, and I seemed powerless to stop it even as I screamed out with my voice.

As we moved back, I realized, with resounding horror, that if she didn't stop soon we were going to go past my time in Dise. Back to Marefort. To Stable 42. No. I saw an image of the swimming through murky water trying to save Serenity, and then we flashed back again. No, we were getting too close I had to end it. If she went back to Wildfire's death... I don't think I could take it.

Or worse... if she flashed back to... no. I couldn't think of it. I had to stop this fucking magic gone awry.

No. There I was waking up in Bridle Hope. Damnit, no. Stop. We moved back again, past Smooth Tongue, and to...

I was cradling her in my arms again, rocking her softly. She was saying something as she bled from the horrible wounds in her head, but my eyes were so blurry from tears I couldn't see. Why can't you just stay dead?! Wildfire. Just. Stop coming back. It's hard enough living without you, so why did you keep coming back to haunt me? Just... just stay dead. It's hard enough to live with myself and... and I couldn't bear knowing I could be living with you.

We flashed back again.

*I'm... I'm so sorry.*

And again. And again. Time moved back until I was in the hospital listening to the radio. And again to the cliff. No... no I had to end this. Get out.

Get out. Get out. Get out. Get out. GET OUT!

Light.

I was back in the bed in the tunnels under Dise. Looking down I realized the magic must have made me vomit. I felt...

So sick. So tense. Like there was this heavy pressure in my head that was just about to break and send everything out. Tears. I could feel them already. I'd been crying so much lately.

"I... I didn't think. I-I am sorry." She stuttered. "I thought I could control... I could hear everything." Of course. She took away my senses but kept them herself. "Wildfire, I a--"

A second later I had her pinned to the floor, my metal hoof pressing against her neck. "Never." I hissed. "Never say that name." Tears fell, splashing onto her cheeks. "Never... you can't. She has to..." She had to stay dead. I couldn't think about it. I had to be Hired Gun, not Silver Storm. Silver died, she died with Wildfire. It was the only way I could survive.

I was sobbing again. Damnit. I needed to be tough. The wasteland was hard; I needed to be harder. I couldn't cry. Nopony likes someone who cries. But it was so hard. My metal leg felt weak and slipped from her neck. The next thing I knew I was sobbing into Platinum Haze's chest. Why did she have to bring the memories back. I had almost got rid of them. I was so close...

But I kept crying and hoped she understood.

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What happened next was sort of fuzzy.

I know there was crying involved. Deep heartfelt moments of talking and more crying. I spoke more than I ever had before, and she just sat there and listened as I spilled my heart out. Why? I'd no idea. It made no sense, but I couldn't stop myself. I told her about Wildfire, about Serenity, about my feelings. I...

I didn't tell her about Foundation. I could never go that far... but I told her more than I should have.

She just listened to me though. Even though I talked about the stupidest things. It was her fault anyway. Messing up the spell. Making me go back so far but, thankfully, not as far as she could have.

With a heavy sigh I rested my head on her neck, my eyes too dry to cry anymore, and my heart so numb I could barely think. I guess I should mention that we were cuddled up on the floor, and she had a wing over me, but it hardly seemed important. I know ponies would get the wrong impression (or the right one...) if they saw us, but I was so emotionally exhausted I really didn't care. I just needed somepony to be close. Even if it was a stupid fuck-up alicorn that I was only close to because she read my memories wrong.

"I really am sorry," She said slowly.

"I know... you said that. Fifteen times."

"I--"

"I counted. It's enough." I closed my eye. "It's okay. I never should have let you do it. Never trusted magic." She squirmed for a second, but I didn't bother opening my eye. She was so warm I could sleep right there.

"It is just very confusing. The world. Ever since I broke apart from Unity things have been moving so fast. It is a challenge keeping up." I felt her chest move as she sighed. "With Sea Breeze dead, and Diamond Sky gone to rescue the remains of Celestia's Vision--" I would like to pause to remark on the irony of Celestia's Vision being rescued by an alicorn. "I am supposed to be teaching the children we have gathered... I am not doing a good job at this moment." I thought she was doing a wonderful job being warm.

"I guess... where are the children?"

"Playing, I assume. The ages vary, but we have tried to contact those orphans who would not shoot us on sight. The older ones take good care of the younger and..." I peeked open my eye to see a look of stern concentration on her face. "Whoever made this school under the ground equipped it with a

playground.” Wallkirk, no doubt. That mysterious (OoooOooo) buck who built the tunnels thought of everything. Except, of course, how to make the tunnels radiation-proof.

“Makes sense. Must have toys too.” She nodded a bit, and I closed my eye again.

“... I really am sorry.” Oh, c'mon. Just let it go. “All those things. I...” She shuddered. “It could not have been easy. If I had known... I did not intend to make you cry. Your filly was just so sure...” She didn't make me cry. It was a long time coming, I suppose. She did help. I guess. At least it gave me someone to angst to.

“It's fine. And she is not mine.”

“And why not?” She seemed very indignant. Wait, that's not the right word. Haughty maybe? Well, she seemed very something at any rate.

“I... I'm dangerous.” That was true at least. “I bring bad luck. Ponies around me die.” Why would she even ask? She just saw the truth of that for herself. Sure, maybe she didn't see as far back as she could have but she saw enough to know the truth of it. “She needs to be safe. Not around me. So she's not mine. She can be the Watchers'. Much safer.”

“Huh.” She stood up, depriving me of her warmth, a fact I was a little bit upset about... get your mind out of the gutter. So I wanted some comfort after the past few days of horrible stupidity and extreme emotions... It didn't make me a fillyfooler or anything. Seriously. And I wasn't staring at her ass!

Right, she was talking. Pay attention. “Strange that you would think the Watchers would be safer for her,” she said walking to the door of the infirmary and peeking out. “She had told me much when I found her, and I remember distinctly it was the Watchers' fault she was enslaved.” Oh yeah... “And were it not for you, she still would be. If anything, I would think that would give you reason to protect her directly.” But... I mean. So the Watchers lost her.

Then failed to save her. I mean they must have tried, right?

“Safer than with me.” I got to my feet as well because the floor was cold and stuff... “Since we met, she was nearly drowned. Hit by shrapnel, stabbed, and almost shot. Not to mention being captured. Many, many times.”

“But.” She retorted as her wings flared out. Stretching them I think, but it did do a good job making her more menacing. “You saved her each time, did you not?” Well, yes, but. I tried to speak but she cut me off. “This is the world we live in. It is dangerous and life threatening. I was chosen for this city because I had lived here in my previous life, and I know the hostility of Dise and the surrounding wasteland. As long as she is young, she is in danger, so tell me what would be better protection for her. An organization that cares but cannot commit resources to save a filly from harm, or a single mare with the strength, fortitude and ability to bring her through even the most dangerous places relatively unharmed.” Stop being so reasonable! “I believe you when you say you don't think she should be with you, but you can't continue to lie to yourself an-”

“Fuck off. What do you know?” She looked visibly shocked by my outburst. Good. “I can't protect her. I couldn't before; I can't now. So I got lucky a few times. Fixed my mistakes. In the end, I can't. Just. Let it go.”

“You have said you want her safe. An admirable goal, but you have offered no real solutions to achieve it. I will not attempt to convince you of your own qualifications, but you can't seriously think the group that failed to protect her once is right.” Well I. I grit my teeth and looked very sternly at the ground. Why couldn't she do it then? “And yes, perhaps she could stay with me. I have sworn to protect my charges, but to be frank... you are the first adult pony who has not tried to kill me on sight.” I what,

really? Why would anypony try to attack her. She was like a beautiful goddess... thing. "So if we were found out, then who knows. Perhaps Diamond Sky could teleport us to safety."

"Why wouldn't you?" I assumed Diamond Sky was another Alicorn.

"That spell is beyond my ability. You see each alicorn was created with..." Eyes glazing over. "...just, I can't. But even if we were found here her safety couldn't be guaranteed." She sighed. "I understand you wish her safety, but nowhere is safe. Not even here."

No. Of course not. Ever since I got into Dise ponies had been telling me how it was on the edge. That the forces vying for control were one step away from destroying themselves, and I was finding that easier to believe. With the minotaurs to the west, the NCA to the south, Steel Rangers and Zebra clans hanging out east. Not to mention the four gangs of Dise, The Watchers, The Finishers, Celestia's Vision, and Remnants. Everpony wanted a piece, but Dise wasn't that big.

And ever since I met Dragonslayer I had been getting this sinking feeling that somepony was trying to make the balance break down. Maybe it was Dragonslayer himself (if that was his real name) or maybe it was whoever he was working for.

So what then. Dise wasn't safe, so I had to take Serenity further away, but to where? South to the NCA wasn't a bad idea, but I wasn't sure how to get there. Or maybe to Equestria but that would mean travelling near Crimson Hoof territory, (not happening) and I'd heard there was still fighting up there. Besides, if the NCA lost control of Dise, what would happen? There just wasn't a simple answer. The world had ended, and it was up to me to keep a single filly alive in the madness.

"It doesn't matter." I said simply. "She hates me." As she should. "I can't protect her anymore. She wouldn't let me."

"Do not be so sure..." She looked to the door. "I have been gone too long, and Serenity will want to have words with you. I shall retrieve her. Please, just think about what I said. You aren't perfect, but when you're not trying to be horrible, you are the best she's had." It was hard for me to contradict her when she just saw the short form of my life since I left Marefort. Stupid unicorn magic. Alicorn. Whatever.

With that, she left the room and closed the door behind her. Only for her magically flowing hair to get stuck, causing her to gasp in pain. I grinned just a little at her, as she sheepishly opened the door and blushed at me before closing it again. It must have sucked for her. She was so large everything must have seemed small to her (I could feel for her on that, though she managed to be larger) and her flowing uncontrollable mane and tail couldn't help.

I looked around the infirmary for a few minutes (It was white and boring. Medical equipment seemed strewn about haphazardly, and I may have looked through the medical boxes to see what they had) before I called out: "Batmare, she's gone."

With a sharp burning sensation The Batmare appeared to my left. "I know better than to question how you knew," she said simply. "I trust the alicorn not. Anypony that takes up the visage of the Goddess is not to be trusted." I rolled my eyes. Eye. Sorry, that was going to take some getting used to. "But... it seems for the nonce she is harmless. I have studied her facilities and watched the children. In such a short time, she has accomplished a lot. I do not trust her, but see no reason to dispense justice upon her."

Thanks. I guess. If she went and slaughtered Haze it would just have been another weight on my already guilty conscience. "So you are leaving?"

"My work here is done. I have figured out the mystery, and deemed her no threat at the moment." She

paused. "Your daughter is here, correct?" I winced but nodded. "For your sake, I shall tell no pony what I have seen."

"...mind telling two ponies?" The superhero turned her head to me, I could only assume in curiosity as her face was a mask. "Do me a favour. I need to let my... friend. Know where I am. If you could sho--"

"Do I look like a servant?" No. She looked like a... bat? I suppose.

"How about I give you the description of a known, er, evildoer." She liked to fight them right? Well, I'd just give her Dragonslayer's information, and maybe she'd take him out for me. If nothing else, it'd be a thorn in his side if he ever came to Dise.

Reluctantly, I got her to agree. After giving her a detailed description of the asshole who shot out my eye, as well as what Flare (turns out they met before) and High Stakes looked like (as well as where they would most likely be). With a flash of magic she vanished again, leaving my shoulder feeling slightly burn-y.

My head hurt. Everything was happening faster than I liked, and you know, getting mind raped made my brain ache. Not to mention my emotional breakdown after having to relive Wildfire's death... seriously. Don't mention it. Ever.

To the extent of my emotional exhaustion and pain I scavenged through the medical boxes again, took out a med-x and jabbed myself with it. The pain faded immediately. If I was going to have yet another serious talk with Serenity, I needed to be in my best health. I kind of blew it last time because I was in pain, and grumpy. Now I was emotionally exhausted, but mostly good, and my pain had been soothed. I could do it. Just one more heart felt conversation...

Fuck. I was going to fuck this up.

Okay. First things first, stop pacing. Good. Stand still. Now smile. No, a real smile. Urgh, okay don't smile. My smiles reminded ponies they needed to throw up, not good for reconciliation. Okay. Maybe I should offer her a gift like a-

The door creaked open and I felt my heart jump into my throat.

"Serenity..." The filly walked in, her eyes staring intently at the ground. "Serenity I-" She looked up. Her grey eyes were even sadder than usual, and the words caught in my throat.

"Your leg." My what? Before I had the chance to say anything she stormed over, and with a flurry of pink magic unattached my leg before stomping her way into a corner to look at it. I hopped on my three legs to get a look at her, but she didn't bother looking my direction. "You got it wet." I did? Oh yeah! When Flare and High Stakes woke me up, I forgot about it.

"Serenity." She kept tinkering with it, not even looking back at me. "Serenity... just look at me. I-"

"I'm sorry." No. Stop that. In order for a pony to be sorry they must first do something wrong. That didn't happen so she could not be sorry. "I... I shouldn't have interfered. If I didn't, then--"

"Is that what Haze told you?" She shook her head.

"I..." Why couldn't she just look at me? "I knew. From the start. I-I shouldn't have blamed you, you were just do--" No. This is what I wanted to avoid!

"No, Serenity. You should have." I sighed taking a seat facing her. The Med-X wasn't enough to stop my head from pounding again. "I was wrong. The job I... I shouldn't have taken it. Shouldn't have showed you. I was... trying to prove. Something." I sighed. "It made sense before. But now... I was wrong. I killed him."

"I helped." She sniffled, and I could hear tears dripping. "I... I messed up your shot and... and I kept bugging you 'bout being my mommy, an I shouldn't have... but I thought if I kept asking... that maybe. I thought that maybe you were testing me. Trying to see if I really wanted you to... so. I shouldn't have, though. 'Cause whenever I asked, you looked so hurt but I didn't know why, and I really wanted... needed somepony and-" She sobbed.

"I- I'm sorry." What else could I say. I felt like there was a barrier between us. An invisible wall of emotions I wouldn't be able to break or get through without telling her about Foundation but... but I just couldn't. Just the name sent shivers up my spine and if I thought about it... it was too much, but I knew it was what was needed. I couldn't figure out what was worse. Argh. "I... I was afraid. That something would happen to you. So I... tried to show you who I was. I fucked up."

"Yeah..." We at least we could agree with that. "But. I'm not mad at that... well I am. Sort of. But it was my fault, and it was an accident, and I'm really mad. I don't know!" She slammed her hoof against my good leg. "I'm so... I hate you for what you did and myself for helping, and not realizing that everything has gone all wonky and... and I don't know what I want and..." More tears. "And I still want you to be my momma, but I don't. And you're horrible but amazing and... and I don't know."

"Serenity. I don't know either."

"Why! Why can't you... couldn't you be my momma?" She turned her head halfway to me, tears streaming down her face.

"I..." I couldn't break down that wall, not yet. But I could at least try to explain it. "I had a daughter once." This was surprising enough that her eyes lit up. "But. Things didn't end..." I could feel myself going back there. To that place. It felt like my body was slipping away, as if I was in that time spell again. I couldn't go back. I wasn't ready.

I slammed my hoof so hard against the floor the concrete cracked, and Serenity jumped. "I can't. I just. It's hard. I can't. Just trust me. If I could, I would. But I got scared and... and did something stupid." It shouldn't have been so hard. It was only the past... but it was a past I'd spent so much time pushing away and pretending didn't happen that even acknowledging it was hard. "I want you to be safe," I said softly, barely above a whisper.

"Mo-Hired. I don't... I don't know. I want to forgive you, but..."

"I thought the Watchers would be safe. I was wrong. Clearly..." Dise wasn't safe. It was Safer, but it was not good enough. "When I asked and found you gone. When I went looking. Nopony was surprised. Annoyed yes, but foalnapping wasn't a shock." Foals went missing, and no pony was surprised. It was normal. Sure, maybe this time they went here. But what about next time. More slavers? Murders? Crazy scientists? Who the fuck knew, but it'd be normal in this city. In the wasteland. Who could save her if something like that happened and I wasn't around? This city was too broken, too...

"I've decided." I stood up on my three legs. "I am going to fix it."

"What?"

"The city. Dise." Despite everything, Serenity started smiling so wide it seemed like she was holding in hysterical laughter. "I'm serious. I'm going to join House. Help him fix the city. Bring it together. One ruler instead of eight. So that... so you'll be able to grow up. Without fear."

"Hired..." She stood slowly, my metal leg slipping away from her. "You can't fix the city... it's always been like this. I... I don't even know... if I forgive you. You still killed Post Haste, and I don't know -- how can you say this all of a sudden!"

“No place is safe. Not with me. Not with the Watchers. Not here.” I gritted my teeth. I was determined to give her safety. To let her know peace. “If I can’t put you someplace safe, I will make it.” I could hear Flare now. Telling me how stupid I was. How it's ridiculous for me to claim I wasn't her mother, and then immediately proclaim to change an entire region for her, but fuck it. I'm stupid! I needed to do this. It would be my purpose, and I would fail in the end, because I always did, but I would give it my everything.

The wasteland needed a place where fillies didn't have to worry about slavers, wars, or gunfights. I wasn't the pony to do it. I was a horrible foal killer, a monster, and a Hired Gun. But I was going to give it my all, because somepony had to try, even if it killed me. I didn't deserve to live. I should have died so many times, but somehow I hung on. Better ponies than me had died in my wake, yet I survived. But survival wasn't enough anymore. I had to survive for something. Giving Serenity the peace she deserved... I couldn't think of a better reason to live.

Even if I couldn't be her mother (not yet). Even if she hated me (and she should). I would do this thing. Because it needed to be done, and I was the only pony stupid enough to try.

“Hired...” She walked up to me and hugged my good leg. “I'm sorry... I shouldn't have manipulated you... I... I am sorry.” Stop being sorry, I'm the one who was wrong! “I... I don't know if I forgive you. Because... I...” She sniffled.

I laid down on the floor so I could wrap my leg around her. “It's fine. I don't forgive me either.” I guess we made up. I wasn't even sure. It seemed just as bad as ever. Now not only did she hate me for killing Post Haste, but she hated herself because of her part. I... I could tell it tore her up inside more than she wanted to admit.

So where were we? I wasn't sure. But I think for the first time we were honest with each other. From there whatever we were could grow, even if she hated me. Or herself. We could move forward. Or apart, whatever she wanted. But in either case I'd made my choice.

I held her closer. Her eyes were closed, but she was not smiling. Her muzzle scrunched up tight and she let out a soft sigh. She wasn't going to forgive me soon, if ever. But for now, that didn't matter.

Level up!

Perk Remembered: Cherchez La Filly: It seems in your drunken fit last night you accidentally bucked down your closet door! No, you can't change your perk now, and it doesn't matter because everypony already knows! Yes, it was just that obvious, so you might as well admit it to yourself because you get +10% damage to the same sex and unique dialogue options with certain ponies! ... No. You can't get rid of the perk. Stop asking.

((A/N: Hi, and welcome again to the authors notes. I'd like to thank kkat for doing the world building for me, and my editors theBSDude, Mint Julep, and Errant Indy, as well as substitute editor editor Menti. They require all of your praise.))

((Also, if you're looking for more FOE goodness, try these stories. [Fallout Equestria: Salvage](#), [Fallout](#)

[Equestria: Misfits](#), [Fallout Equestria: The Ditzzy Doo Chronicles](#), and [Fallout Equestria: Best Served Cold](#).)

((Don't forget to check out the final instalment of [Heroes With Wings](#)!))

## *Chapter 15: Coincidences*

*“Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action.”*

So, here's a question. At what point do you look back at your life and realize how much you fucked up? I mean, in the grand scheme of things, everypony has regrets -- things they wish they could take back, choices they wish they hadn't made -- but I think ponies like to cover up our faults. It's so easy for us to gloss over our mistakes and make excuses for ourselves. That's okay in some cases, but when you'd fucked up on as grand a scale as I had, you needed to look back and kick yourself, else you'd just keep fucking up.

I'm rambling again. Point is, I'd messed up. Maybe if it had only been Post Haste, I would have been able to get over it. But it wasn't. I, in my immense wisdom, had managed not only to have Karkhoof burned, but also the entirety of Celestia's Vision slaughtered in retribution. Of course, that wasn't all I'd done. If we wanted to take a tally of the horrible things I'd done, we'd have to go back a ways, and I'm sure it'd take hundreds of thousands of words to properly describe. But the worst things I did, I think, were against foals.

From Foundation to Post Haste, I failed them all. Hell, not twenty minutes after raiders killed Mischief (remember him? Precocious Watcher scamp I met way back in Bridle Hope. I always wondered if he knew Serenity), I offered to work for said raider squad. The work I got involved me killing an innocent (Nanny Jane was not innocent, but at the time I had thought she was) and kidnapping another filly who I nearly sold to the same raiders that had killed Mischief. In the end I hadn't, of course, but getting that close had been bad enough. And those were not even my worst crimes.

Wildfire used to tell me I was a natural with foals. A natural killer maybe, but I'm not sure what else.

So that left me in an awkward position. Somehow, I needed to reform. Do better, be better, or hell, I'd settle for not fucking up any more. Yet I was not sure how I was supposed to go about that. Should I wander the wasteland, righting wrongs and saving ponies like The Lightbringer? Or should I stay in Dise, fighting petty crime like The Batmare? Would either of those things really be penance for my numerous crimes, or just a way to try and forget what I did? Would any number of raiders killed, or ponies saved, really make up for Post Haste? Or would it just be me trying to go out in a flame of glory, my death for a noble cause somehow washing clean my record?

These were questions for a smarter pony. A part of me longed to fix my past, but I couldn't, so I had to try and help the future. I doubted it'd ever remove the guilt or the dreams. So I decided to try and fix things here in Dise. Maybe Mr. House wasn't the best that Dise had to offer, but he was the only pony I could think of capable of uniting the city. If I could do that, somehow break the stalemate of war that captured the city and create a place where ponies could live unmolested, then maybe I could die happy.

“But I'm not sleepy.” Serenity pouted up at me.

Happiness. I probably didn't deserve this moment. “What if I read you a story?” We were still lying on the floor of the infirmary, but it was getting late. Haze had popped in a few minutes ago, saying she was going to put the other children to bed, but that Serenity could sleep in here if she wanted. Obviously, as a filly, she took offence to sleeping. Ever.

“I'm not a little foal; I don't need a bedtime story.” I raised a single eyebrow at Serenity. “But...” There was a burning in my shoulder as she levitated a book from her saddlebag, and propped it up against my outstretched leg. “I would really like one...”

I smiled down at her, but she didn't look up. I knew at least part of her still hadn't forgiven me for what had happened, but I think she was trying to move on. She was willing to give me another chance, and that was more than I was willing to give myself. Looking down at the book, I found I knew the words already.

“Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria.” I read flawlessly. It was strange, I never did have the chance to read this to Foundation. I'm sure she would have liked it though. “There were two regal sisters...”

I'm sure you know the song. There was a good sister and a bad sister, and for some reason the good sister banished the bad one to the moon because the bad one was feeling unloved.... Well, maybe stories aren't as clear cut as we wanted to believe. Maybe both sisters had good and bad, and both made bad choices that they felt were necessary.

Or maybe I was grasping at straws to bring them down to my level.

The story ended with Twilight Sparkle and her friends using the Elements of Harmony to defeat Discord, bringing peace to Equestria for another thousand years. Well, at least the book had an optimistic view on the future, even if it got a few things wrong. It was a nice story, though, with a happy ending. More than I could say about any story I knew.

When I looked down at Serenity, I realized she was flopped over my leg, her eyes closed and snoring softly. I couldn't give her up, not after everything that had happened. Not when she was like this. I had tried to force her away, tried to make her leave, because I cared about her too much.

So, I guess I could go on and on about my conflicted feelings and regrets and stuff, but I think I've made my case. I was going to try to do better by her, create a place where she could live unmolested. If she wanted to come with me... even after everything, then I wouldn't try to stop her.

In my head, she was already my daughter, despite everything... Yes, I know it doesn't make sense! It's a deeply confusing and complicated issue, so hard to wrap my stupid head around. Truthfully, I'd seen her as my daughter ever since the tunnels... but I was scared. Can you blame me, after what had happened? So I had freaked out. That cost me an eye and a good chunk of my soul, and part of me still argued it was the right choice. Stupid brain, make sense!

See, this is why I bottle up my emotions, because when I didn't, they made no sense and conflicted with each other.

Right, I needed to pause my navel gazing to get the filly to bed. Luckily, Serenity was as sound a sleeper as ever, so it was easy to lift her up to the hospital bed and tuck her in without her even opening an eye. It was harder to look away from her sleeping form.

There were more conflicting feelings, of course; it seemed par the course recently. Mostly now it had to do with how I saw her. In my mind she was a sweet innocent pony, and for the most part that seemed true. On the other hoof, she had admitted to trying to manipulate me, even if she didn't fully understand what she was doing. So that left me... where, exactly? One of these days I'll come to a conclusion about something eventually... I swear.

“Is she asleep?” I turned my head sharply to see the blue alicorn, Platinum Haze, standing in the doorway. “You must be good. Last night it was a chore getting her to sleep, though I am sure you bear some of the blame for that.” She smiled just a little bit, but I couldn't read her intentions. “I had an easier time getting all the others under my charge asleep than that one. I don't know how you manage.”

What was it Serenity said about The Watchers? That they were nice, and kind, but never seemed to care about her. That she was just another child to them. I had no doubts about Haze's motives or ability, but

would she really be able to care for Serenity the way she needed it?

“Practice,” I said.

“You must teach me someday. For all that she said about you last night, she seems to have taken you back with surprising quickness.” Because I gave her the love and attention she desired, maybe? Even if I, myself, was unsure of why I was giving it. We were, like, the most messed up family in the wasteland. We could defeat raiders with the pure force of our emotions.

“Maybe...”

“You spoke many more words to me earlier, why the brevity now?” You mean when you mind-raped me into an emotional breakdown? Yeah, that was totally normal for me. With a sarcastic roll of my eyes... eye, I pointed my head at the sleeping filly. “Oh. Perhaps we should converse in a place where we will not disturb anypony.”

“You don't say?”

She led me out of the infirmary and down the small hallway of the school structure. It really was surprising how much she and her partner had managed in such a short time. I mean, it looked mostly clean! Cleaner than any section of tunnel I'd seen, and considering how dirty all the tunnels around were, it was impressive. If I were a normal pony, I'd worry about how they planned to feed, clothe, and care for all the foals they were kidnapping... rescuing... whatever, but that hardly seemed important as Haze walked in front of me. Her hips swaying as she walked. I mean, I wasn't a fillyfooler, but I was staring so hard I thought for sure her super alicorn senses were going to notice.

Stop judging me.

“Are you feeling okay?” She asked when we were a ways down the dank hallway.

“Uh,” I said staring at a particularly large crack hastily covered up with tape. “Well. I'm a one eyed tank with crippling attachment issues. So...”

“I mean I saw you injecting yourself with a Med-X when I came in. If you are hurt, I can take a look.” Oh, did I mention I had developed a headache from all the emotional thinking-stuff, and I had taken a Med-X to release some of the pressure? It wasn't that big a deal, so I didn't think it was worth mentioning.

“It's nothing.” I couldn't see her face, so I couldn't judge her emotions, but I was just going to assume she understood. “Where are we heading?”

“To my room.” The narration will continue after I drag my head out of the gutter. “You will need a place to sleep tonight, and I don't imagine you'd like to bed with the foals.” Of course. “Since I will not be using it, you can have my bed.”

A light flickered to my right, almost causing me to jump. Lacking that whole sight thing on that side can be tricky. It felt like somepony was constantly sneaking up on me. “Uh.” Right, talking. “You don't sleep?”

“Well. It is complicated.” Don't tell me then. I wouldn't understand. Why did it seem that everything having to do with these alicorn things was complicated? “We can sleep, but it is not as necessary unless we are injured and have no radiation to heal with.” They heal... with radiation? That didn't sound very healthy to me. Of course I was not a master of health and safety, so I didn't express my disbelief. Alicorns just worked funny, I guess. They were magical and did magic stuff... with magic. That's all I needed to know. And they were pretty...

“I see...”

“You do not understand at all, I am going to assume. That is okay. We are strange creatures, I am sure.” Yeah, something like that. “Right this way,” she said before stepping through a doorway (she had to duck).

The room was... er, sparse. Half of the floor was covered by a giant pile of rubble (I guess when they were cleaning the school, the junk had to go somewhere), and the only furniture was a shockingly clean mattress on the floor that I wasn't even sure she could fit on. The lights that usually lined the walls in the tunnels seemed half out, too, giving the room a dark, foreboding feeling... okay that wasn't true. The dim lighting reminded me more of The Moon.

“Are you blushing?” Ack. No, I was not. I stormed in and looked away from her, but I couldn't avoid her chuckle. “It is fine; I find it cute.” Wait, what? “I mean, uh. That is not the intent I was... what I had in mind, what I meant to say was...” Socially awkward alicorns are the best alicorns.

“It's fine.” I collapsed on the bed. Somehow it felt like the Med-X had worked its way through my system already. “Slip of the tongue. Calling me cute.” I closed my eye and wished I had a pillow. It'd be so very nice, though I did not enjoy the idea of actually going to sleep. Nightmares and all that.

“No... no, I mean, you are cute, but it was improper to say it in such a nonchalant way.” She seemed to speak in an uncomfortable titter. A far cry from her attempt at pompous regality at first. Of course that all went away when she messed up that spell of hers. “I mean. You have a lovely face? Er, not counting the eye... or the ear. But I mean, I really like your... mane?” I laughed.

I knew it was a little rude, but it was hard not to. I mean, you spend your entire life putting off the advances of a mare like Wildfire (whose special talent was flirting, I swear...), and it's hard not to find her attempts just a little silly.

“I --” she stopped, “I am not very good at this, am I?”

“Not really.” I opened my eye to see her standing back, a faint blush on her cheeks. I wasn't even sure why she was trying at all. I mean, she knew I was dangerously emotionally unstable. And it wasn't like I was exceptionally pretty... okay sure, I was the first pony she'd met in Dise who hadn't tried to kill her. And yes, I get that she was previously part of a hive mind, and it must be jarring being alone after so long like that... okay, so, I guess it made a little bit of sense.

“I am sorry. It is uncouth of me.” Unco... I did not know what that word meant. Let's see. 'un' made the word negative, so she was clearly not couth. And couth sounded like coo, and... yeah I was lost. “It is just... when I saw you staring at me, I'd thought that perhaps you had an interest, it does not matter, my apologies.”

“You need practice,” I said with half a smirk.

“I used to be quite practised!” I couldn't tell if she was honestly insulted or faking it. “Before Unity, that is. I had acquired many marefriends, and all praised me on my flirting skills.” It was a struggle not to laugh some more. “I... stop laughing at us!” I wasn't, really. Heh. “We are not to be mocked; this is a truth we have told.”

“I am not laughing.”

“‘Tis a lie, we can... I can hear you.” She blushed a bit but kept her eyes on me. “You shouldn't mock us... me like that.” She fidgeted awkwardly, “I am sorry for trying. I understand now you are not interested...”

“Nothing against you.” You just made me relive my ex-marefriend's death a few hours ago, and I wasn't in the cuddling mood. “I'm not a fillyfooler.” And then she was laughing at me. Well it was more of a nicker, but it was close enough that I counted it. “What? I'm not. Really.” She kept on laughing.

She knew me all of a few hours, at the very most. How could she possibly know my preferences?! I don't care what anypony says, I was not that obvious.

“If you remember, I saw you staring at me with your own eyes.” With that stupid memory spell, right. “And you are not the most convincing liar.” I was the most convincing. Ever. I'd managed to get everypony I met to buy into the whole, 'My Name Is Hired Gun,' thing, despite it being a really stupid name (though not so stupid as Dragonslayer). “I suppose after what you went through tonight it was a bit early... but... it matters not. Sorry.”

“You apologize too much.” She also seemed to pace as she talked, speak in plurals, and explain her thought process out loud. If you were wondering my opinion on her. Which you weren't. “I...” Was not looking for a marefreind. Because I wasn't a...

You know what? Fuck it! I was a fillyfooler. There, I said it. Wrote it. Whatever. I was deeply enamoured with the cunts and asses of the female persuasion. Despite my reservations at this revelation, it was getting harder and harder to live with this charade. And while it still made me uncomfortable thinking of myself as such, it was so clearly true and obvious there was simply no point lying about it.

Even if I really, really wanted to lie. It was just so much nicer in my closet. Maybe because in my stupid mind, stallions and mares was the way it was supposed to be, and the fact I deviated from my stupid mind's stupid rules made me question how much power I had over my life.

Are we happy now? Huge revelation over! Now if only ponies (Flare) would stop bugging me about it.

“I hadn't thought about it,” I said quietly. I mean, companionship was not something I was against, but this was a bit sudden. She was pretty, I suppose... well, mind-bogglingly beautiful, but that was... uh... my train of thought got lost somewhere. Right, just because she was good looking was not a good foundation for a relationship (A great foundation for a good lay though), and...

Mental images. Fuck.

Bad choice of words. Okay breathe, Silver.

“Are you alright?” Fine. I was fine. Just the mental images. Right, going back to not being a fillyfooler. That was fun while it lasted. “I have made this all very awkward, haven't I?”

“It's fine.” With a tired grunt, I lifted myself off the bed and trotted over to her. “I just. Need to sleep. And think.” Not that I wanted to, navel gazing was hard work. “And. It's just. Sudden.”

“In my experience, the wasteland can be quick and brutal. So much has changed in barely two weeks, it is... so many of my sisters have died, and... if one does not act quickly, than they may lose. I am sorry for being so forward.”

“No I.. Don't worry about it. At least you're honest.” I gave her a half hearted smirk, but she seemed a little bit down from my rejection... thing. Stupid, cute, pouty goddesses. I was going to regret this, I knew.

I leaned up and kissed her.

She gave a murmur of surprise before a sigh of acceptance. It wasn't the best kiss I'd ever had, but it felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I really needed somepony. It was comforting to have that kiss, even if it only lasted a second.

“I KNEW IT!”

My eye snapped open, and I turned my head to see Flare grinning from ear to ear at me, his eyes sparkling with what must have been a thousand jokes.

Fuck.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” I said, after High Stakes (who also showed up) pulled me off of Flare. I gave Flare my very best glare and scowled at him, while I secretly wondered where Haze went as I couldn’t see her. My question was answered quickly for once, when she appeared out of thin air, blushing slightly.

“Some crazy mare dressed as a bat showed up in my hotel room! We had the door locked and everything, and POOF there she is. Told us you needed us, so we come down here to see you making out with what appears to be a goddess... and let me just say, daaaamn. When you come out of the closet you come out with a bang.”

“It was just a misunderstanding...” I said, giving a glancing look over to Haze who was sitting meekly on the bed beside me.

“Oh! Did you misunderstand?” Flare flapped his way over until he was right in my face. “I saw you!” He poked my nose. “Kissing you!” He waved his other hoof at Haze who meeped and blushed, ungoddess-like. “This is like. Blackmail heaven.”

“To be perfectly clear, Mr. Flare, was it?” Haze had managed to get past her embarrassment quickly, as she was stood with her wings outstretched threateningly. Flare sunk back to the ground nodding. “I do not know who or what you think you are, but this place is meant to be a secret, and if you cannot keep secrets fully then there are other ways to make you.” It may have been my imagination, but her yellow eyes seemed to be glowing. “Are. We. Clear?”

“Uh,” Flare mumbled as High Stakes chuckled at him. “Crystal.” I like my alicorn marefriend. She wasn't my marefriend, but it just seemed like a good thing to say. “So. Are you going to explain what the fuck is going on down here? Ain't nothing good in these tunnels; they're crawling with ghouls, radscorpions, and who knows what else.”

Oh right, with the explaining. Haze explained what exactly was going on in this particular section of the Dise tunnels (the rest of the tunnels were still up for grabs) and I explained why I had told ponies about it. Or rather, told somepony to tell somepony. Mostly, it was so they knew where I was, as I had descended into the questionable depths of the Dise underground, and oftentimes that's unsafe.

“Ain't never heard of no Followers of the Apocalypse,” said Flare, who was hanging upside down in the air. “And let me compliment the name choice. It really screams, 'Saviours! Seriously, trust us!'. But I did see an alicorn or two. Went on an escort missions a while back to try and open up relations with a group up there... something about an eye or something.” He smirked. Or frowned. Being upside down it confused me for a second. “Anyway the deal was a bust, but I saw one of those alicorns... come to think of it they looked a bit different than you. The ones I saw all looked like twins, but... eh, it's been a while.”

“Red Eye’s army,” High Stakes said. The name made Haze go rigid. Apparently, she knew it. “I worked for him a long time ago, but left just around the time he started contacting alicorn emissaries regularly.” His glasses shined. “I made a rule of working for whoever paid the most, but even I could see that Unity was up to no good. Considering events in Equestria recently, I can safely say I made the right choice.” I bet he actually got fired and was hiding it.

“Unity was up to good,” Haze said sharply. “Though perhaps our methods required more thought, the goal was true. Alicorns are better suited to life in the wasteland. Radiation heals us, and we are immune to taint, both of which would kill any regular pony. I fail to see how making everypony an alicorn would be a bad thing.”

“Now wait, young missy, hold it. You've gone and oversold it.” Flare landed on the ground with a thud,

and pointed a hoof dramatically. With a sigh, I laid down on the mattress and closed my eye. This was a fight for smarter ponies. "I know for a fact that Unity couldn't even make male alicorns, or alicorns out of anything but unicorns..." There was a brief pause. "What? I've read the reports... they weren't my reports, mind, and I had to steal them, but I read them!"

"We were working on ways around those issues; if we had had a little more time we..." Her voice slowly faded away as I drifted off to sleep. What? It was a really boring topic.

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I... don't want to talk about my dreams. I'm just going to say they weren't suitable for foals or the elderly, and it was very nice. Don't judge me.

"...Alicorns this far south, I tell you what, ain't never thought I'd see them this far ya know? It's madness! Madness!" The over-dramatic stallion whose voice I awoke to was Flare's. As if there was ever any doubt.

I could already tell I had only slept for a few hours by how tired I still was. And sore. For some reason my head was pounding worse than from a hangover. I'd take a Med-X, but I didn't want to have to explain myself to the likes of Flare and High Stakes.

"It's not so strange. With the goddess defeated and Red Eye dead, they must go somewhere. Platinum Haze claims to be from the city before her turning, so it is logical that she would wish to return here."

"Stop using that fancy logic thing, and let me have my emotional over-excitement!"

"Flare. You're loud." I grumbled and my eye opened. Lazily, I scratched at my eye-patch. My eye seemed to itch when I woke up, how annoying. High Stakes was lying on the floor as Flare flapped around him. As I slowly got to my hooves, I could feel a slight burning in my shoulder. "Where did Haze go?"

"One of her foals wet the bed, and she had to go deal with that." Flare nickered before gliding over to me. "Now aren't we glad Serenity don't do that? Honestly, I don't know how she plans to deal with all these kids, I mean sure she has 'Unlimited Cosmic Powers,' but that don't mean dick when you gotta deal with foals, am I right?" Totally. Kids were trouble, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Also, I spoke entirely in cliches right after waking up.

"Yeah." I said, stifling a yawn. I should still be asleep. That would be nice.

"She seems nice enough, Hired." High Stakes was giving me his chiding tone, so I prepared myself. "But I would advise caution if you plan on pursuing a relationship with an alicorn. They are notoriously unstable." And I wasn't? Not like I was slowly going crazy and hearing my dead marefriend whisper in my ear constantly or anything. "It is ultimately your decision, but I would rather you not become a splatter on a wall."

"Right." I stumbled off the bed. "I'm not a fillyfooler." Okay, I was for all of five minutes... "And I wasn't going to. I barely know her." There's a saying in the wasteland: You're going to die young, so live fast. It was by that motto that the population of the wasteland continued to be replenished despite the high death rate. Though re-population was hardly an issue in this case, the rest of it still applied. It wouldn't be fair to Haze if I accepted her clumsily made offer anyway. Not with that whole Wildfire landmine ready to explode at any given time.

Watch as I attempt to logically address my emotional issues! Because that always works.

"If you say so, but you seemed pretty invested in the kiss from where I was standing," High Stakes said.

“Right... when I want your opinion I'll ask.”

“Hired, really?” Flare said. “Maybe you should listen to the opinions of others, ‘cause when you don't, you go crazy and shoot colts, and-” before I even had the chance to charge him High Stakes zipped in front of me with a stern glare. “Right, touchy subject. Got it. I think y'all need to get over shit like that, ya dig?”

“Flare...” I tried to warn him.

“Just hear me out for once before kicking me into next week. I mean, way I figure.” He gave me a pleasant smirk. “World we live in thrives on misery and hate and all that lovely stuff. It's trying to make all the ponies into mopey mopes... like you, so the best way to fight back is to smile. World wants to kick you down, so grin at it, because it can't take away your ability to smile and by doing so you beat the wasteland at its own game. A personal rebellion, and it works so well.” He smiled. “If the wasteland could talk, it'd be flipping its shit right now.”

High Stakes, of course, threw in his two bits. “While I am fairly sure that the wastelands lacks an anthropomorphic representation to personally try to make your life miserable, Flare is not without a point. Studies done before the war showed that smiling actually improved one's mood.” There was a pause as I tried to comprehend that statement. “Mind you, those studies were performed by the Equestria Ministry Of Morale...” I wasn't sure what that meant. I guess it was humorous because Flare was certainly laughing.

“No thanks.” I dismissed the entire idea out of hoof on principle.

“Thanks?” Flare snickered. “That was very nearly polite, Hired, we're very worried you're losing your touch. Just be a little bit ruder. For old times' sake. Your marefriend must be making you soft.” Going to kill him, I swear. “Oh! You fell asleep before we could give you something, so hold off on the ass-kicking. Mr. High Stakes, if you will.”

The tall stallion nodded, and at once my shoulder began to burn, and his horn glowed. Actually, my shoulder had been burning sporadically since I woke up. Hm. My mind was torn away from the mini-mystery when I saw what they had brought for me.

“SUBTLETY!” I grabbed my weapon in my forelegs and caressed it gently. I was never going to go without it again. The poor thing, I'd been neglecting it so much recently, and it really needed to be cleaned and maintained. The poor thing.

“I guess I owe you twenty caps,” the unicorn said.

“And you doubted me! Hired loves that gun more than damn near anything, I was surprised she let it go in the first place.” I could hear Flare smirk. I'm not sure how, but I just knew he was. Then there was my shoulder burning again. Right I still needed to deal with that.

“Thanks.” Two thanks in a single conversation. Maybe I was going soft... “Oh. Batmare, you can come in now.”

With a flash the dark clad mare was standing between us all, her mask glaring. Because masks can do that. “How did you...” she said before stopping. I had to turn from her to attach my gun onto my saddle, but I was totally paying attention. “I suppose this is another one of those things you do not wish to explain.” When my shoulder burns, there's magic around. Explaining didn't matter because I didn't understand.

“How long have you been listening?” High Stakes demanded, his voice unnaturally tense. I wasn't entirely sure why, but whatever bugged him was okay with me.

“Not long, I have only just returned for a matter most urgent.”

“Oh.” I turned back to see the remains of a blush on High Stakes cheeks. “Good.”

“What is it?” I turned back to The Batmare only after re-attaching my gun onto my back. Just where it belonged.

“A matter most urgent.” Right, you said that. Care to explain? “Recently there has been a rash of sickness in the slums in eastern Dise, and from my studies I have deduced the water fountains are the issue.” I heard the exact same thing on the radio the day before, I failed to see her point. “I believe it has been poisoned.” My ears perked up. Now that was something. “If it is true, the culprit might try again tonight, but I am only a single pony. The more fountains that are observed, the more likely we can find the perpetrator. I am asking for your assistance, and to fulfill your duty as my sidekick.”

“Wait, wait wait. So, Hired here is a... Super Hero In Training? She needs custom barding with that emblazoned on it!” Flare flapped in the air so he could rub his chin. “But that might be too long. Well maybe if we make an acronym of it...” What?

“Make whatever it is you wish, but it must be tonight, and now. Your companions may help if you wish... Yes.” The Batmare posed dramatically. “But we must be off! Before he can strike again!”

“What about Haze?” I said. It was impolite to leave like that.

“Write her a note or something, just hurry, Hired, we're going to be 'super heroes'.” Right, got it, Flare.

After a I wrote a short note (Sorry. Have to fight crime. Be back soon.), the four of us left Haze's room and started for the surface. I felt a bit ridiculous doing this thing, and High Stakes seemed to have his own reservations, but I had made a resolution to try and fix Dise, and letting ponies die of poison seemed to go against that entire goal. It was strange though, going off to do a job without a direct paycheck waiting for me. At least I was sure this was something Serenity would approve of.

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Running sucked, and I wasn't very fast when nopony was in direct danger. Even High Stakes was about to outpace me by a few ponylengths, and that was not even getting into Flare and Batmare who had to slow down so they weren't miles ahead. On the plus side, this allowed to me to hit myself with a Med-X when they turned a corner without me. My head was still pounding, and I didn't want to explain myself and run at the same time.

The tunnels had been friendly to me lately. When I had first gone down them again, I had been sure I was going to be attacked by fifty packs of radioactive ghouls. While that was certainly still possible, it now seemed less likely. The tunnels we were in now were not only partly clean and well lit, but they even had ponies in it from time to time. Not many, but still.

Of course, we also ran past a half dozen rad scorpions too... remember that time I beat the Batmare with a bag of scorpions? That was fun.

Eventually, we reached our destination, which was, not surprisingly actually, a rickety set of stairs. What was surprising was that when we reached the top we found ourselves in a ruined shack in the middle of the eastern Dise slums. I'd been told multiple times that while the tunnels spread out across Dise like a web, all entrances in the city proper were owned by a gang, or group, or something. Yet here we were in the half ruined, shoddily re-made buildings of eastern Dise, and nopony was stopping us.

“So this is the entrance.” High Stakes said. with a smirk he looked around the small shack, before stepping thorough the door into the moonlight. “Mr House has heard rumours that an old entrance was being used by smugglers, and traffickers.”

With a flash of light, The Batmare stood before him, glaring through her mask. “If you inform anypony about this I shall consider you a agent of chaos, and all who serve evil must be culled. You do not wish

me for an enemy.” I am pretty sure the Batmare would win. Her teleportation skills were just cheating. It'd be like being able to sense magic or something... oh wait.

Speaking of sensing magic, I could feel a slight burn. I made a mental note to focus on it to make sure we weren't being snuck up on.

“I would think not.” High Stakes' glasses shone in the... moon light? I guess. Not sure what else was bright enough around. Actually, I've decided to stop thinking about it. Oh, High Stakes was still talking. “I see no reason to give this information away so freely, it could be valuable... to my safety it seems.” He finished when he saw that the superhero was still glaring at him.

“Justice has its eye on you!” she shouted, far too dramatically and far too loudly, before vanishing and reappearing a few feet back.

“I like her!” Flare said. I shot him a look as he continued, “She's insane, but at least she's amusing. And if she can do half of what she says she does, then she's helping to keep the forces of evil at bay!” I sighed and nodded along. I knew he wasn't being serious, but it was far too late for me to care. So instead, I walked out of the little shanty and did my best to remember where it was. I'd need to if I wanted to see Haze again.

“Sidekick!” The Batmare flashed in front of me. “Take the insolent one to the nearest fountain due west and keep to the shadows! The winged one can cover multiple sites. I shall be off on my own. If you manage to capture a dastardly villain, merely shout my name, and I shall be there.” Why shout? Why not something more subtle? Like a searchlight shaped like a bat. No pony will notice us at all.

“Right...” Why was I doing this again? Right. Because I decided to fix Dise. Whatever that meant.

“Good! Get to work, brave soldiers of peace!”

POOF!

And she was gone just like that leaving the three of us staring awkwardly at each other. “So...” I said slowly looking between the two stallions. High Stakes coughed into his hoof.

“So... guess I'll go, uh... fly.” Flare vanished in a blue blur, leaving me and the tall unicorn stallion I really never did like.

“Why exactly did we agree to this again?” Stakes asked, trotting off down a gloomy rubble filled street. “It is not like we are getting paid for this, and it seems out of your character to accept a job without so much as a second word.” Right, now I was being lectured for not being greedy enough.

“Things change.” I shrugged before stepping over a sleeping drunk. “Besides. Poison water effects everypony. I drink too. It's in my best interest.” And maybe, just maybe, this pony had an ulterior motive. If there was a crazy pony poisoning water I wanted to know who hired him. And somepony *did* hire him. This was Dise after all, nothing happens on accident.

“Really, poison?” There was a hint of amusement in his voice. “Not sure why you'd care about a thing like that.” I did not comprehend. Not that it mattered we had arrived at our destination. A small square shaped like a circle (Or. Something. A clearing place where ponies buy and sell stuff) with a small water fountain well thingy in the centre. No ponies were there now, but the water was still flowing.

“Over here.” I said. There was a small unused stand off to the side of the square... circle thing. I guess that during the day it was used to display a large quantity of questionable merchandise, but for now, it would serve as a hiding spot as we would be able to fit between it and the house wall it was up against (though the wall had a window on it, I was sure no pony would look out to see us). We couldn't really see the fountain behind it, but we would hear if anypony was nearby. Or if a unicorn had a silence spell (like Serenity), I would be able to feel their presence. After we settled I finally said. “What did you

mean about poison?"

"Do you remember the land sharks?" The skyscraper-sized worms that tried to eat me? I forgot all about them. Idiot. I nodded to keep him talking. "Their poison is one of the most deadly ever researched in the wasteland." This I knew also after what happened to Back Up. "You were bit by one." Oh. Okay, that I actually forgot. I was bit wasn't I? It wasn't one of the things that got extra attention during Haze's spell, but I remember seeing something like that. Or it was my own fuzzy memory of the event.

"Right... so?"

"You're not dead," he said, laying down beside me. He was uncomfortably close, but it was the only way for the both of us to fit in the hiding spot.

"I..." I looked down and moved my hoof around. "Nope. Not dead. So?" I'm sure he had a point somewhere in there, but I wasn't sure where.

"You should be dead. No pony had ever survived a bite from them until you." Okay? So? I was a very lucky pony what was the point. "There is a high likelihood you are immune to poison." That didn't seem uh... possible.

"I'm not." I said, putting my head down. I could feel a slight burning in my shoulder not coming from High Stakes. It was far enough away I didn't worry about it. "I got drunk last night." He raised an eyebrow at me. "I threw up. Alcohol poison. Means I can't be immune."

There was a second of shocked silence before he said. "Good point. I did not consider that... perhaps you are only immune to particular poisons or... uh... I don't suppose you'd agree to undergo some testing?"

"No."

"Oh. Acceptable, I suppose. And I'd thought I was being clever and everything. Not that it would matter if you were poisoned anyway. According to Sky Fall." He spat. Really. He actually spat at the name. Way to be dramatic. "You are dying as it is. What's dying a few months earlier." He gave me a smirk. Was that supposed to be a joke? I certainly hope not.

Besides I wasn't dying. I had seen ponies die of sickness before and they always seemed... sick. I was healthy, and strong, and not coughing or anything. There is no way Sky Fall was right. Star Metal or no, I'd plans to live for long after he expected me to drop dead. He was just trying to bug me or something. Pegasi were always trying to play pranks like that...

Another few seconds of awkward silence passed.

"So. Should we tell Serenity we know she's there?" I said. "Or should we wait a few minutes until she realizes?" The unicorn stallion tilted his head at me. I guess he didn't know. She had been following us since we left the school. She was trying to be sneaky by using her spell... I guess she figured if she was far enough away, I wouldn't be able to sense it.

Less than a second later I felt something land on my head.

"How did you know?!" Serenity said loudly into my ear. She'd evidently been hiding in the window above us.

"Magic." I rolled my eyes. "You should be asleep." She just giggled.

"Couldn't sleep, Haze was being loud. Think she knocked something over." That wasn't very surprising. She tried very hard but was not nearly as graceful as you'd imagine a goddess to be.

"I too am curious on how you were able to locate Serenity following us. I neither heard nor saw anything of the foal." Did I really have to explain my special powers to everypony? Couldn't I just be awesome and not have to give exposition all the time? It was stupid. To that extent I didn't explain and let Serenity do all the talking.

"Hired's leg burns around magic," Serenity said with confidence. Only to amend her statement when she saw him staring at my flesh and blood leg curiously. "The other leg silly... not the leg, like the neural connection port thing." She waved a hoof at my shoulder plate thingy. "She says it burns when somepony around her uses magic, an' I think she can tell who's usin' it and how far away they are."

He stared blankly at me, no doubt wondering if we set this whole thing up to mess with him. I kind of wished we had because it would make more sense that way. "How can..." High Stakes paused and face hoofed. "I suppose it matters not. No doubt you two have no idea the implications of what you just sa—" his mouth kept moving but his voice was cut off. I gave a slight chuckle at the pink glow around his head. Serenity's magic had so many uses.

Unfortunately, High Stakes still had more to say. His horn began to glow as well, sending out rays of green light against the wall of pink. There was a brief, tense moment as the two beams fought against each other, but it only lasted a second before the spike of light shattered through, lighting the area in a green glow. As soon as that happened, the battle of wills was over, and the pink aura dissipated into mist.

"Impressive." There was a faint smile on High Stakes lips. "You held that longer than I expected, you are talented for your age it seems."

"I'm basically in the top ten most best unicorns in Dise." She giggled. Clearly not sleeping made her hyper. To think I read her that story for nothing... "Morowynd taught it to me, and it's like the only spell I know 'sides telekinesis a 'course, but I'm good at it."

"That's the only spell he taught you." She nodded. There was a look of confusion on his face, that slowly faded. "Right. Whatever. You two are very confusing, if you weren't aware."

"You're following us," Serenity said, right before jumping on top of the stand we were hiding behind and breaking her cover. "You don't gotta, I mean. You work for House, right? So you never had to come here at all. So if we're confusing, you're even more confusing for following confusing ponies into confusing places."

High Stakes stared up at Serenity as his brain tried to process the information. "Your filly is far too logical. I hope you realize this." Naw, shit? "You two couldn't be more different."

"Sure we could." I mentally prepared myself for more impeccable logic. "Hired could be a Hellhound, or a Minotaur, or a Griffin, or a Discord." Yes I suppose those things would be fairly different. I'm not sure I'd want to be any of them either. I mean between being bipedal, winged, or a chaos god thing. I'd still rather be an earth pony. It just made more sense.

"Discord is not a species," High Stakes pointed out. He was helpful like that. I was starting to think he and The Batmare should be the ones teaming up. He was Captain Obvious after all. "He is... or was a draconequs. Hired could never be a discord... It's not important."

You don't say?

Serenity giggled and did her very best to stifle a yawn. "You're silly. I like you."

That can't be good. Last time she liked a pony I had to drag them around everywhere... Okay, Flare has saved my ass once or twice, but still. Actually never mind. Flare may have been spying on me (and I wasn't quite forgiving him) but overall he'd been okay. At least he was amusing, and reliable when he

wasn't spying.

“Er.” High Stakes looked away before continuing, “I am glad I could please you then.”

“Soooo.” Serenity said leaning over the edge of her stand towards High Stakes. “Can you teach me any cool magic tricks?” The stallion groaned, but Serenity seemed not to hear. “Like, a moustache one! Can you teach me? Flare would look so handsome with one, don't'cha think?”

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The night dragged on at an astoundingly slow pace. Yet no matter how long we waited, no pony besides the three of us entered the square. Maybe there was no poisoning pony, or maybe he was going to a different fountain, or perhaps we scared him away with all our chatter. And by our, I clearly meant Serenity's. I was content with listening and brooding over my mistakes. I won't go into that though, for I am sure you are sick of it.

Eventually though our (Serenity's) chatter died down. The little filly was valiantly fighting her sleepiness, but it was just too late for her. Still with a stifled yawn, and irritated twitch of her leg Serenity jumped off my back and away from our little hiding place. “So bored,” she said, turning the corner.

“Serenity.” I said. The stupid stallion to my left just chuckled and shook his head. “Serenity, get back here.” There was once again no response. “Seren-”

“Don't worry.” Came the response. Because that was going to happen.

With a sullen sigh I stood up, my body towering over the stand that was our cover. It probably did a horrible job. Serenity was balancing on the rim of the water fountain, waving her forelegs on occasion as she tried to keep from falling. “Don't worry.” She said licking her lip in concentration as she teetered on the thin lip.

“Well, Serenity.” High Stakes stood beside me. He looked a little exhausted, and I couldn't really blame him. “We are supposed to be keeping watch for a... er, bad pony, who is trying to hurt other ponies.” I was going to venture Stakes wasn't really good with kids.

Serenity managed to slowly lift her forelegs off the lip and balance just on her back ones. I was a little bit impressed. “The poisoner pony, Ah'm not stupid, stupid.” She giggled. “sides. We've been waiting here forever, and ain't nopony showed up. What's the chance of-” Why was my shoulder burning.

There was a sudden bright flash.

The light burned my eye, and I had to close it, but I could still hear the sound of splashing. When I opened it again I saw Serenity flailing around in the fetlock-deep fountain, as The Batmare watched on with what I assumed was an frown on her face. After shaking her head, Serenity sat in the water, her mane dripping and her eyes glaring at the superheroine.

“What are you doing in the open?” The Batmare scolded me, ignoring the glaring and wet filly climbing out of the fountain behind her. “That is counterproductive to the mission. You are jepord-”

“You just. Teleported here. In a flash of light.” I helpfully pointed out. “Stealth doesn't seem to be the goal.”

“What is she eve-it matters not!” She posed herself dramatically as a wind blew out of seemingly nowhere to ruffle her cape. “I have to address a matter most urgent! It seems there is a commotion in the very place the water is purified! The water purification centre!” You don't say?

“So?” I said.

The Batmare gave me a very hard stare (I assume. Once again, that damn mask.) while High Stakes chuckled. Eventually the would-be hero said, "If you were trying to poison the denizens of Dise, could you think of a better place to do it?" Oh wait, yeah I guess that made sense. "Flare spotted flashes of lights he claimed were most certainly explosions. We must be swift!" And she was off running.

"Wait, I do-." She turned the corner. "Fuck." I quickly ran over to Serenity and threw her on my back before giving chase. Damn fast Batmare. I turned the corner to see a long empty street. Broken buildings rose on either side, their facades masked in the shadows of the night. Not that poetry helped me any.

"Do you even know where the water purification plant is located?" High Stakes asked, standing beside me with a slight smirk. My silence seemed to be all the answer he needed. "Follow me." This time, when he took off I followed right away. I really need to get a map of the city. It'd save me so much time and effort.

We exited the Dise slums and started down the eastern road that lead to the city centre. Serenity tugged on my ear as I ran, and she said into it. "Is this a good idea?" You mean running towards explosions? Probably not. But if the Batmare was right, this pony needed an asskicking, and I was in the mood to grant him that. Besides, poisoned water does not generally cause a stable society

"Not at all." I admitted.

"So why-?"

I cut her off. "Somepony has to. I'm free." I guess the answer worked, as she didn't question it further.

When we reached the fountain in the centre of the city, I found The Batmare perched on the top of the pony statue in the centre. Also there was a small crowd of drunken ponies crowded around watching her. "How did she get up there..." I heard one pony ask. There was a murmur of questioning as the Hero stood perfectly still staring down at me.

"Sidekick!" she called when I got close, causing the whole crowd to turn my direction. Fuck. "What is taking you so long?" I needed something to hide behind. Dammit, they were all staring at me. What I wouldn't give for the ability to teleport right about now. "Well, say something!"

They were still staring at me. I hate crowds. I mumbled something at the ground, and did my best to keep from blushing. "uh..." I coughed into my hoof as one of the drunken ponies cheered. Great. "I was... caught up. Thought I saw a robbery?" Yeah that was it. I had to go and justice or something.

"Yes. Justice waits for nopony!" With a flash and burning sensation, she appeared in front of me. A ragged cheer went up from the small crowd, and I thought I heard a few ponies stomping their hooves in approval. "For now, we must be off. Follow me!" She took off again, this time travelling down the south road. Leaving the bewildered crowd behind me, I took off after her as Serenity giggled on my back.

High Stakes was nice enough to slow down enough to keep pace with me. "Why must we always run?" He sounded more than a little bit tired. It was a good question though. This Batmare seemed to always want to run everywhere. I'm sure it helped her super-heroing, but I was getting tired of it. Oh well, keep running.

As we ran, we passed a series of increasingly bewildered ponies. Hopefully none of them would recognize me. I really didn't want to be associated with the wackjob of a superhero. Eventually, we moved past the two apartment buildings (one of which served as the Enclave home base) and even south past the Watcher camp. Not long after, we came upon a clearing and a split in the road.

To my left, down a short, straight road, was a huge domed building that seemed to emit an eerily green

light that shone up the side of the Dise wall it was built against. To my right was a huge compound of buildings surrounded by a large and imposing metal fence. Complete with barbed wire on top. The Batmare went right so I followed.

As we closed in the facility I could clearly see three ponies standing in front of the large entrance gate, and one on the other side. They seemed to be conversing casually until they saw us running up. "Hey!" a green earth pony shouted. "You aren't allowed in he-"

The Batmare vanished.

She reappeared a split-second later, landing on the stallions face with a resounding smack, hind legs first. She pushed off his head, sending him into the dirt, and flipped through the air. She landed with an impressive kick to a second pony's side. The second pony grunted, but kept her hooves, at the same time bringing her pistol around with magic. The bullets hit nothing but air.

A series of flashes later and the second pony was lying on the ground with most of her teeth cracked in. All this in mere seconds, while the third and the fourth ponies yelled loudly into their radios. The Batmare flashed behind the fence smashing the fourth pony's head against a console. An action that made the metal gate start to slide open. A second later, the fourth pony was thrown through the now-open gate directly into the third pony.

With both of them crumpled over each other, the hero wasted no time appearing on top of them. With a few sharp cracks, they lay motionless. Maybe dead, but I wasn't sure. At this point, the first green stallion was starting to get back up. Luckily for me, I'd just gotten close enough. He turned his head towards The Batmare. It was so easy just to buck him. The impact shook up my legs and sent the poor buck flying through the open gate and sliding through the dirt.

The Batmare gave me an appreciative nod as a roar ripped through the air, coming from inside the facility. It was enough to send her off running again. I stood there a second as the ponies groaned in pain around me. It really was a good thing that mare was on my side. Sure, I managed to fight her to a draw, but I'd had an advantage. Any other pony didn't stand a chance. Even I just happened to get luck. Another explosion.

"Hiiired." Serenity said jumping on my head. "Shouldn't we go...?"

Right. It was hero time.

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The hallway was bright, cleaned, and completely empty. I wasn't sure where Batmare ran off to, so me and High Stakes decided to go to the largest building and try to find the source of the commotion and (more importantly) find Flare who had went to check it out ahead of us. Normally, he would have met us at the entrance, or we would at least be able to hear him talking or something.

I started down the hallway, the only sound was our collective (Serenity had decided to walk and had apparently brought the gun I gave her at Karkhoof [I'd forgotten about it in all the commotion...]) hoof steps. We passed a few empty offices but didn't have the time to explore. Empty...

Why was everything empty?

A better question might have been was why was my shoulder burning if everything was empty? My two unicorn companions were not using magic, yet I could feel something... even worse, it was something familiar.

"Ever been in here?" I asked of no pony in particular as we walked down the long hall. Off at the end of the grey hall, I could see a set of double doors which seemed to be the best bet of where to look. It didn't help my gut that the closer we got, the more my shoulder burned.

High Stakes spoke up, "No. The Mustangs have always been very protective over this facility..." And yet where was everypony? There should have been more than four guards... something very strange was going on here, and if Mayhem didn't know now, he would soon. I'd hope not to be here when that happened. "I think I should have stayed home; there is no way this will end well. I have a terrible feeling about this." Way to jinx it.

"Maybe they all went to bed?" Serenity said with half a yawn. I could see her watching the empty offices as we passed, just itching to go exploring.

"You don't believe that..." I stated plainly. We were already reaching the end of the hallway.

"I'm just tryin'a be optimistic. You two look grim." She snorted. "Making the same face 'an everything."

"I'll be fine, Serenity, we just need to find Flare and leave this place. What happens here has little to do with us," High Stakes said.

"Or." I said reaching the door. "We could stop whatever is going on." I pushed the doors open slowly, "You know. Do the right thing for a change." High Stakes could only smirk as I stepped through the door into a huge room.

The large room stretched out impressively, but it had a noticeable lack of substance besides a low ceiling and some overhanging lights. This was because most of the room was a giant vat of water, save for a walkway around the edge of the room. Moving over to the edge of the walkway and leaning over the railings I could see a huge pool of water. Bubbling steaming water. Oh! And there was a rickety catwalk above the bubbling pool with two ponies on it. I guess I should have mentioned that first.

"Flare!" High Stakes started running towards the catwalk. Idiot.

I looked at the catwalk again and saw why. Flare was being held over the bubbling lake by his neck by a Minotaur wearing what looked like a blue uniform. That was easy enough, I just had to scope Subtlety and... fucking hell! In my rush to be reconnected with my favourite gun I accidentally mounted it on the right side. I couldn't scope with a missing eye, and I couldn't shoot from the shoulder with Flare so close. So I had to start running too. I reached the rickety catwalk just as Flare looked over at us, and grinned.

"About time!" Flare yelled over at us. "I've been stalling to show yo-" Flare was shut up when the minotaur punched at him. The blue pegasus ducked the blow and slammed his hoof against the Minotaurs uniform, leaving something with a blinking light sticking to it. "you this!" With a flap of his wings, the pegasus detached himself from the monstrous beast and zoomed away. At the same time, the minotaur desperately clawed at his shirt. He managed to tear it off and throw it down the catwalk when...

**BOOM**

The explosion shook the walkway sending me stumbling to a knee. High Stakes behind me fell too, and Serenity I was sure felt it. As smoke started to rise I waved a hoof at High Stakes. "The catwalk is too small for two. Get Serenity! I'll deal wi-" He was already gone when I looked and talking to Flare with a look of relief on his face. So I guess it was "Ignore the leader" day.

I turned back to the minotaur and got myself a good long look as he slowly struggled to his hooves after being knocked over from the blast. Unlike Ginger, his coat was a deep blue, and he didn't seem nearly as buff as The Watchers pet minotaur. In addition his horns spiked straight up, as opposed to the curled ones on Ginger, and how the fuck did he get in here without anypony noticing? As he stood to his true, impressive, and bipedal height, he didn't seem to be that stealthy. That was until his hand

glanced a device on his waist. With a crackling fizzle he vanished from sight, and my shoulder started to burn.

“You can use magic!” I spurted out. There was barking laugh but no answer. It didn't matter, fuck minotaurs, Silver Charge!

He may have been able to turn invisible, but that didn't mean shit to me. I was able to turn and buck exactly where he was. My hind legs connected with his chest, turning his laugh into a hacking cough. I couldn't see him, but I could feel the burning fade slightly as he backed up. Booyah, my super powers were improving. It was just enough I could close in, rear, and kick him, much to his surprise.

“How can you see me, pony?!” I heard a disembodied voice growl. Then the burning shifted suddenly sideways as if he had jumped off. But down there was boiling water and steam, and that would be suicidal and... the burning was behind me. I tried to turn, but in the narrow corridor I couldn't manage it quick enough.

A sharp pain in my back sent me face-first into the steel grating. Pain flared up my back from another hit. Before I could try to crawl back up, I was lifted into the air by my hind legs! Flailing my forehooves around, I tried to kick something, anything, but I couldn't connect. I could feel him staring at me, but I was looking at thin air. Actually I was looking at the end of the catwalk as Serenity and High Stakes watched on. They could have shot him at any moment, but no doubt were afraid of hitting me. Thanks.

“You ponies are an annoyance,” the voice growled. “I am trying to do my job not deal with-” Feather! Flare slammed into the minotaur. I hoped it was enough to distract him. I started swinging. Back and forth. Back in Marefort, I could trapeze my way around like no other, and I still knew how. My forehooves connected to the beast's invisible chest, and he dropped me. On my head.

After crying out in pain, I rolled onto my hooves, rubbing the back of my head. The burning sensation was moving again, but this time I saw a flicker as his device weakened. It was just enough for me to see him swinging along the outside of the safety bars with his stupid hands. They must have been so useful... So I saw where his hand was, raised my hooves, and stepped on it, inciting a cry of pain from the minotaur and a creak from the catwalk.

“You stupid little pony!” Something grabbed me.

The beast tugged at me with its scarily strong arms and pulled me over. Turning, I managed to hook my cybernetic leg on the edge of the railing. This still left me dangling over a vat of boiling water. The steam it was releasing was making me hot, and sweaty, and slick. I could almost feel myself starting to slip.

“Stupid pony.” The field of magical whatever faded leaving me staring over the railing at a pissed-off blue minotaur holding a mangled hand with his good one. “Just trying to do my job.” The monster grabbed my metal hoof. “So piss of-”

BANG

A splash of blood came out of the creature's already-injured arm, and off to the side I could see High Stakes lining up another shot. He didn't get the chance though, as while the minotaur backed up down the walkway I felt something pushing me up from behind.

“You're... too fat,” Flare grunted, before dumping me on the grate. “Go kick his ass already!” Right. Got it. I scrambled to my hooves feeling catwalk shift under my hooves. That explosion of Flare's must have done a number on it, and this fighting wasn't helping.

“Stupid pony,” the minotaur grunted, holding at his arm, but doing little to stop the blood flowing down

it and dripping into the water underneath the grate. "Don't make me hurt you." He took a step forward. "Leave now."

"You work here?" I asked. He kept saying he had a job. I wasn't sure if it was working here or sabotaging the facility, but I had to try to ask. "Is that I-" I shut my mouth as he lowered his head and started charging! Lowering myself I lifted up my metal leg.

With a smash, and a shriek from Serenity behind me, his horns pierced through my leg, but stopped centimetres from my face.

Their points were a bit too sharp and a bit too right in my face. With a grunt I lowered myself more. "Stay." I lashed out with all my strength. "Back!" The horns ripped through my leg in a shower of sparks and wires, but he was sent into the air. He landed with a crack on his back, grunting and gasping for air.

"Now." I said with a stomp of my hoof. "Do you work he-" The catwalk shifted. With a echoing crack the whole platform started tilting down sending us both sliding down towards the boiling water. Shit shit shit! Flailing over to the side, I managed to hook a leg on a railing, leaving me dangling on a catwalk that was only getting steeper by the second.

With my hind legs dangling, I looked further down to see the minotaur barely holding onto the grate with his one good arm. With a grunt he tried to climb up, but between me and High Stakes his other arm was useless. I really didn't want to him to die. I have no idea why! I must have been getting soft.

"Stay still, I think I can carry you!" Flare said, his wings beating fast. "Just." He started groping at me. I could feel my leg slipping from the steam, but I shook my head.

"Grab the minotaur." I said with a grunt. The pegasus looked like he was about to a laugh. "Seriously! He might know what's going on." There was more confusion on his face. Idiot. It wasn't like we were the only ponies here. "High Stakes, levitate me up."

"He did just try to murder me. That sorta thing doesn't lend well to my heroic instincts." The catwalk cracked and shifted nearly making me lose my grip. "And he's heavy, I ain't that strong and if he struggled he might-"

"FLARE!" My voice brokered no argument. "Just do it!"

"Fine, fine, but if we all die, I refuse to take the blame!" He floated down and grabbed at the blue beast with his two forelegs. "Now hold on tight, and no more choking me." The beast nodded it's bull-like head, and held on as tight as he could with his good hand. Slowly Flare managed to drag him up through the air, but only by flapping his wings as fast as they could go. Good.

"High Stakes!" He lifted me back in the BS, so he should be able to do it again. The stallion nodded and I felt myself go weightless as his horn started to glow a pale green. More layers of light were added to his horn as I was slowly lifted up. I could see sweat forming at his brow, and he grit his teeth. Apparently telekinesis was not his forte, but he still managed to lift me close.

That was until I dropped.

My heart fell into my chest. I was falling. I slammed into the metal catwalk with enough force to snap it. Fuck, it was falling! Flailing my hooves, around I prayed to Celestia I'd grow wings. The metal catwalk hit the water with a splash of scalding liquid. I covered my face. This was going to suck.

Nothing. I stopped.

Opening my eyes I saw myself centimetres from the water with a green and pink bubble surrounding me. With my heart in my throat and steam on my face, I was slowly, much too slowly, levitated up and

deposited beside my very tired-looking friends. High Stakes was sweating and looked drained, while Serenity just laid on the ground with her eyes closed. She'd done good.

"So." Flare dropped the Minotaur a meter on the ground. The creature landed with a thud, and grunted. "Are you going to explain why you almost got yourself killed for the sake of a... thing that tried to kill us?"

Right. I stood slowly to my hooves... and fell over as my metal leg gave out. Landing nose first into the concrete, I swore as loud as I could. Before I could do anything else Serenity was standing beside me, her eyes wide as she looked at my leg. "Noooo, look what you did to it!" she yelled, glaring at the minotaur. "Argh!" She dug strips of metal and wires from her bag, as well as a series of tools I really didn't know how to describe.

"Can you fix it?" I asked. Yeah, I know Flare had asked a question, but this was more important. And he seemed busy talking to High Stakes anyway. Serenity frowned at me, sighed, and went back to work on my leg.

"No, but I can make it work well enough till we can get better supplies." She licked her lip and started laying out some wires from her bag.

"Right." I looked up at Flare, and the minotaur (who was sitting pleasantly on the ground with his arms crossed), "Can somepony... er someone explain to me what is going on."

The minotaur looked at me blankly as if I was already supposed to know. Clearly what we had here was a failure to communicate. "You attacked us." The beast said, "How can you not know?"

"Attacked you!" Flare spoke up. "We're in Dise not... where ever you are from! Somepony was exploding open locked doors or some shit so I went to investigate and saw you!" he pointed his hoof dramatically. "You're lucky I didn't kill you outright! After what your people have been doing, you're lucky we don't kill you, you lying liar who lies!" Wait, what?

"Stupid ponies." He fidgeted at the device on his belt. "I work here. You should not be seeing me," He fidgeted some more. "We are not supposed to be seen. You are not with them, are you?" I shook my head. "This is not good then, not good at all." He slowly got to his hooves. "My name is Unbreakable Will. My clan has agreed to work with the group you know as 'The Mustangs' in exchange for clean water and information. We are better suited to perform the tasks needed to keep the facility operational." Right. Hands sure seemed like they'd be useful.

"Wait." High Stakes had a devious smirk on his tired face. "You are saying that Mayhem has hired *Minotaurs*? As in the same Minotaurs currently camped across canyon ridge bridge with a huge army? The ones that sacked Hoof Town a year back and painted the river red with blood?" He winced a little bit at the accusation but didn't say no. At the mention of Hoof Town, Serenity, for a reason I didn't understand, took Scootaborg out of her saddle bag and let her watch. "Do you have any idea how much this information is worth?!" He laughed bitterly. "Oh don't worry, I won't sell this little tidbit. I'm keeping this for a rainy day."

"We were not meant to be seen for this reason..." He sighed. "It doesn't matter now. My clan members have gone-dark as was instructed. Most have gone to inform Mayhem, but I am not sure we have the time. The white faced pony came, and his ponies overpowered the guards silently. I fear it may have been an inside job; he seemed to know when and where to hit, and all the alarms were deactivated beforehand. " That couldn't be good.

"White-faced one?" I asked.

"Maybe the Laughing Stallion?" Flare said flapping into the air a little annoyed he fought a minotaur

for nothing. "I heard he paints his face white or something." Creepy, I guess. "Kind of a strange coincidence if it was him though. Just happening to be involved in this and his arch nemesis being the one to find out about it first. I mean..." Coincidence. Was it?

"This... Laughing Stallion. Does anyone know who he is?" I asked to the shaking of heads. Even Serenity took time out from fiddling with my leg to shake her head at me. "Who showed up first, him or The Batmare?" I remember hearing something on the radio a while back. New Haygas claimed the two spent a lot of time fighting each other, much to the chagrin of Dise residents. By herself, The Batmare could do a lot of good, but if she spent all her time against one pony, and never resolving it.... Well, that would sour the city to her, wouldn't it?

"The Batmare." High Stakes answered first. "She has been working here for a while. The Laughing Stallion came a few months back, and it was him that caused her to become a feature on the radio." Just a coincidence. "Why?"

"Nothing." I shook my head. "Serenity?"

"Five more minutes." She pouted up at me. "It's criminal what you did to it! It'll never be as good as it was. A classic piece of cybernetics ruined." With a huff she nudged Scootaborg closer, almost asking her to watch, "You'll be able to walk, but don't try running or kicking 'till I can fix'em right, got it?"

"Sorry..." I turned back to the minotaur. I mean, Unbreakable Will. He was a monstrous creature, but monsters don't have names so it was important to remember. "Will, did you see where he went?"

"Yes." There was a long pause. Maybe he didn't know if he could trust us with the information? "The main pumping building." I uh, didn't understand. The silence was so absolute the only sound was the boiling water in the large vat. "The water at this plant is taken from a large underground reservoir, beneath even the deepest tunnels. From there, the supply goes through a series of purification rooms. Boiling is supposed to rid the water of minute traces of radiation." I had to wonder how much fire it'd take to boil all this water. Maybe that's why Roy attacked the power station.... Power stations make fire right? The minotaur continued. "If they seek to poison the water than they have gone to the wrong place. The purification process is thorough enough to clean away anything."

"Why poison?" Flare said. At some point I realized he was flying upside down, but he did it so often I didn't even care. "If I were them, I'd blow the whole thing up." Really Flare? Your first reaction would be to explode things, who would have thought. "Seriously. What better way to poison the populace than make them all drink irradiated water by blowing up the purification place... thing." Wait... fuck. That made sense.

I jumped to my hooves.

"It's not ready!" Serenity said getting up as well.

"We need to go, now," I said, before quickly adding to cut off Serenity's complaints. "We don't have time."

"Go," Unbreakable Will said. "My clan will watch, but we cannot interfere. I will be punished for talking to you." Huh? "We swore to remain unseen or kill those who see us. I cannot kill you, and you have seen me. It is a great dishonour to my clan." Err, sure.

"How do you even get in here? I mean, Dise." Flare said as he landed beside me. "I mean, ain't like you could walk through the front door."

"The tunnels," he said simply. Of course. I guess minotaurs were just one more danger in the tunnels.

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“Where did The Batmare get to?” Flare asked as we left the building. Unbreakable Will gave us instructions to get to the main pumping building, and we left in the hurry.

“I for one haven't the slightest clue. She ran off as soon as we got close.” High Stakes said in a low voice. Who knew who was watching. Well, given the burning in my shoulder I had an idea. I wondered how many minotaurs were watching us right now.

“Maybe we'll get lucky and she'll already have defeated the bad guy!” I smiled down at Serenity as I limped my way along. It was a nice thought, but not very likely. That would imply we had good luck.

The complex itself was annoyingly... uh, complex. Sure, there were walkways between the various buildings, but it still felt maze like with so many different buildings, and that's not to mention the astronomical amount of pipes. It felt like a world away from Dise. What did a plant like this need all these buildings for? I didn't stay on that train of thought long though, as there was no way I'd be able to understand went on in this facility. The only thing I needed to know was that explosions equal bad.

“Just in case, shouldn't we like, hurry?” Flare seemed to be flapping his wings in an exaggeratedly slow pace. Given he was flying to my right, I had to turn my whole head to see him though.

“No way!” Serenity jumped up, grabbed his wing, and dragged him back to earth. “Her leg is stuck together with tape and chewing gum right now, if we move too fast, it'll break!”

“We could go ahead, it seems Hired would not be of use even if we all get there together.” Haughty Stakes. I mean High Stakes said. “Best not wear her out. Flare and I can handle any trouble there.”

“Like you handled the minotaur?” I replied with a smirk, trying to ignore the way my leg creaked with every step.

“That was...” He scrunched up his muzzle to the left of me. “I had little option. I did not risk a shot at first for fear of hitting Flare, and after with you two fighting I could not see him. I am not a melee fighter.”

“Neither is Flare.” I continued the chain of thought. “So if you two go alone. And get jumped. You lose, everything goes boom?” He gave me a long hard glare. “It's better to go together.”

“You aren't fighting with that leg!” Serenity was insistent. Apparently the destruction of possibly the last functioning water purification plant on earth was less important than me breaking my leg. That was just... exactly what I expected from Serenity. I really should have left her back with Haze.

Wait. I did do that. And then she followed me. I guess I should have scolded her, but I was on thin enough ice as it was, so I didn't want to risk it.

We did eventually find the main pumping station to discover it was a fairly small building with four large pipes coming out of it, one from each side of the building. The entrance was a simple metal door that was strangely malformed, a black ring of burnt stuff encircling what was probably a lock and handle once. There was no question that someone had entered recently. And not with permission.

“Serenity.” I said in a low whisper. “Your soundy magic, can you... make it so we can talk normally, without other ponies hearing us.”

“I... I'll try.” My shoulder burned as her horn started to glow a dull pink. Slowly a small bubble of glowing magical stuff surrounded us. “Can't hold it for long...,” she grunted, adding another layer of magic to her horn.

“Impressive.” High Stakes said, his glasses shining because... that was just what they did. I'd stopped trying to make sense if it. “A double wrapped sound barrier that blocks sound from both sides, but allows us to talk freely. It's technically the same spell but such a clever adaptation of it.” Serenity

beamed in pride but had to add another layer of magic to hold the spell.

“Here's the plan.” I said. “We go in. Shoot everything. If they have a bomb, we get Flare to deactivate it.”

“That's it? Charge in and hope we don't die?” High Stakes sure loved to complain. I guess I could have pointed out nopony even invited him along, he just sort of followed, and thus didn't get a say. “We should try to sneak in, and attack from a flanking position.” Blah blah blah.

“There's only one entrance. The building is small. Can't be more than one room.” With a resigned sigh, he nodded. There wasn't a point questioning it. Let's go, charge. “Serenity. Stay behind me. If things turn ugly run and hide.” The little filly nodded. She looked so tired, and was trying so hard to be strong, even as sweat beaded down her head and around her glowing horn. “Lets go.”

The magical field faded around us. I charged over and bucked the door open with a crash, and stormed as fast as I could into the room.

I made it two steps before I was staring down the barrel of a gun.

“Hehehahahahah!” The gun was a mouth-held shotgun pointed by a stallion who could apparently laugh and bite down at the same time. “You should see the looks on your faces! Priceless~” The stallion's coat with a murky red, and his mane was long and yellow, but his face was, as stated, painted white with a stupid red smile. I could see why he kept his face like that, it helped to partially hide the fact that half his face was cybernetics.

“Hey... “I heard Flare mutter behind me. “We were just passing through and thought you'd like some help an-”

BANG!

A bullet slammed against concrete and I heard Flare gulp. Behind the demented stallion, one of his nearly dozen lackeys (all wearing white masks) had a smoking gun in their mouth. All of them were earth ponies. Out of the corner of my eye I could see one of them saunter behind us, and close the door.

“Let's play a little game~” The Laughing Stallion clicked his back hooves together in glee. “It's called, who dies first? Will it be you? The filly? Oooooor, who knows!” He chuckled loudly to himself. “Or I'll tie you all up and let you go BOOM!” The room was small and crowded by ponies and rusty pipes.

My shoulder started to burn and my eyes shot to the ceiling. On the ceiling was a small grate that let in moonlight...

“Really? You're kidding, right?” I said. He tilted his head at me, still chuckling. “I mean. Painted face? Laughing? What the hell are you doing?”

“Why, I'm giving the ponies a show! Ponies *love* shows, and they love to be entertained. What is more entertaining than two heroes locked in an epic duel?! Oh yes. Sure, we destroy a lot, but it's all part of the game.” There was a sadistic grin on his face, but it felt wrong. Something about this felt wrong. Too easy. He showed up just to fight the Batmare, but why? His story didn't add up. His character didn't add up. It felt too forced. I'd met actual crazy ponies, this guy felt like an actor trying too hard. “Too bad Batsy isn't here for the fun, but you'll have to do.” He chuckled. “An earth pony, a pegasus, a filly, *and* a unicorn. We really have a full house, so Miss Hero, any last words?”

I looked back up at the grate, and thought I saw a flash of a purple cape.

“Yeah.” I smirked. “Duck.”

For half a second his act dropped. “Wha-” He turned his head. There was a flash of light, tink of something hitting the ground, and suddenly smoke filled the room. I cracked my metal hoof against his

face. My Metal leg shuddered but kept together. And he went sprawling into the growing smoke.

Gunfire filled the room.

“Serenity!” She was faster than I was, and I could feel her magic off in a corner. Good. I charged in after the Laughing Stallion trying to kick at him. Too bad smoke was everywhere.

It was chaotic. Muzzle flashes and Batmare's magic came from every direction. I tripped over a pipe into an earth pony that I promptly kicked in the face. A second came from beside me, mistaking me for a friend. So I turned and bucked him into a wall. I don't know how Batmare thought these smoke grenades were a good idea! It was crazy.

A bullet tinged a pipe right in front of me. Water sprayed at my face, making me sputter and take a step back. Right into a pony. I tripped and fell on my rump over somepony. It was lucky though as I saw the dim outline of a pony diving at where I was a second ago. I felt some pony walk into me. So I grabbed their leg, and threw them down.

“Hey! Hey!” Flare?

“Sorry.” I let him go. “Can't see shit.”

“You're half blind anyway!” Flare barked laughter. “I like it like this! Been so long since I've been in a proper confusing fight.” I smacked him lightly. “Fine!” He yelled over the gun fire. “Watch this.” I heard him flap into the air and a few seconds of furious flapping and all the smoke was pushed to a side of the room giving me a better view of the battle ground.

I saw the two ponies I knocked out groaning and struggling to their hooves, while the one I'd tripped over stayed dead from the bullet in her brain. At least five more lackeys had bullets lodged in their heads too courtesy of High Stakes, who was doing astounding well with his rifle. He had backed up in a corner, and a score of bodies laid out in front of him. How had he been able to see in the smoke? The glasses maybe? The Batmare herself was flashing around the room giving, kicks at random. Not enough to kill, but hurt and confuse. As I looked around, I saw a lot of bodies and spurting water, but no Laughing Stallion.

“Hired!” I turned to Serenity's hiding spot to see her and the villain standing face to face. A drop of blood sliding down the side of his face. How did he know where she was! Could everypony see in smoke but me? No time to think, fuck him!

I dove at him.

Time seemed to slow as I stretched my legs out in a tackle. He turned his head, shotgun still ready.

BANG

My cybernetic leg took the shot and turned to scrap. I slammed into him with my other leg. We rolled through the ground. He got another shot off but barely scraped my barding. My head slammed against the floor. My sight blurred in pain. Before I could react, he was standing above me, shotgun pointed at my face.

“Soooo strong, and yet. Do you feel happy with this life? Do you fancy yourself a hero?” I grit my teeth. “Tell me.” Somehow the metal half of his face twisted into a grimace. “What is the nature of a hero?”

“Pain?” I guessed. Something to keep him talking so I could get ready to kick him.

“Failure. Hehehehe, get it?” he kept talking. “Heroes fail. They try and they fail. If a hero doesn't fail, they aren't doing it right. So congratulations, you succeeded in being a hero, by being a failure. Riddle time is over, now please di-”

A shot rang out.

A bullet hit his shot gun, tearing it from his mouth, and showering my face with shotgun remains. A second bullet ripped through the stallions leg. At once his facade faded. "Fuckityfuck. Dragon doesn't pay me enough to... fuck." He turned and ran, taking another bullet in the flank before running through the door disappearing in the night.

Dragon... he said Dragon. Could he mean Dragonslayer? I groaned and rested my head on the floor. This sucked.

"Hired!" Serenity was standing above me, her pistol floating in her magical grasp. "Your leg! It's ruined!"

Flare was standing above me now too. "I deactivated the bomb. Thanks for the help, by the way."

High Stakes was there too. "Your plan almost got us killed. Luckily I was there to save you..."

The Batmare flashed above my too, a scowl on her mask. "You let the Laughing Stallion get away!"

Failure. If that was the nature of a hero, there was no pony more heroic.

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I limped my way out of the building. Serenity had wanted to fix up all the leaking pipes, but we really didn't have time. I was sure invisible minotaurs were watching us, and Mayhem was going to arrive at any moment. I think she was still upset about the loss of my leg. I kind of was, too. It had been with me since Bridle Hope, and even though I preferred my real leg, my cybernetic one was good too. She even went through the trouble of collecting the larger pieces, as well as the stump still connected to my shoulder.

"High Stakes." I said to him as he exited behind me. He seemed slightly bemused at my three-legged limping. "Tell... Starscream or House or whoever I accept their offer, so long as I get that damn cyber eye... and a replacement leg."

"House doesn't usually bargain... but considering the circumstances...." He nodded at my stump. "A Hizai is far more useful with four legs. I will tell him... tonight I am guessing. Where will you be?"

"Thanks. The School." I needed the rest, even though it was getting scarily close to morning. "Take Flare." Please.

"Sure."

"What! Flare flapped in front of me, "Don't I get a say in this at all?" I shook my head.

"No." I turned my head to The Batmare. "Can I ask something of you?" She tilted her head. "Teleport me to the alicorn school orphanage... place... thingy. With Serenity." Serenity looked half asleep. As we stood there, I saw her closer her eyes, start to fall over, only to snap them open and straighten up at the last second. I really shouldn't take her on these wild excursions, but she... well she was invaluable help. And with her help, we had stopped a crazy pony from blowing up the city's water supply. I'd have to give her some candy later.

"I can..." She sounded tired, too. "For your help here today, but after this I must request you stop asking requests of me. I am neither a taxi nor a messenger."

"Sorry..." I mumbled shaking the sleep out of my eye. "Here." I nudged Serenity beside The Batmare as the hero's horn started to glow. High Stakes and Flare stood across from us in the darkened water complex. All around I could hear the sounds of pipes rushing water around. "Thanks, you two..." I was being polite tonight. "Tell me." The Batmare's horn started to glow brighter. "What is the nature of a

hero?"

"Stupidity," High Stakes said with a snort, as if the question was beneath him.

"Defiance." Flare shot High Stakes a dirty look. "A hero needs to balk at the established order. Why?" We winked away into light.

The sensation was hard to describe. It was like all the cells in my body were pulled away and dissipated, sending a burning light (sort of like the feeling in my shoulder around magic) throughout my very soul. It didn't last long, as soon enough I could feel myself being pushed back together. The whole feeling lasted less than a second, but it was something I would never be able to forget. To think that the Batmare did it daily and so rapidly was mind boggling.

My eye shot open revealing the door I'd used to first enter Haze's orphanage thingy. My hair felt a little... singed, but other than that I was all there in however many pieces I came in.

"You are here," the Batmare said. Not sure why she said it, I still had my eyes... er, eye. "Faithful sidekick, you and your daughter." I winced, and could see Serenity shuffle awkwardly out of the corner of my eye. I'd forgot to explain the situation to her, didn't I? "Have served my cause well tonight. I thank you for your valiant efforts in foiling that dastardly devil, and saving the city's water supply.

Was it really in danger? We took long enough getting to the Laughing Stallion. He could have blown it up at anytime, yet seemed to wait for me... or rather the Batmare. Like he was trying to make it close... and dramatic. The whole situation seemed too easy. Too coincidental. I knew there was something I was missing, but I just couldn't see it. At least I knew about Mayhem and the minotaurs now. That was something simple and easy to understand, and gave me a certain amount of leverage.... Of course since Flare and High Stakes both knew, the Remnants and House were going to learn soon.

I needed more friends who didn't work around me....

"Hired..." Huh? "Hiiired." I looked down at Serenity. "Batlady left..." I looked around. Apparently she had, and I was exhausted.

"Right." I limped towards the door. "You did good tonight, Serenity." She grinned, as if she already knew that. "But... if you're still mad at me... why?" She had said as much early that night (It really was the same day wasn't it? So much had happened I had lost track of time.)

"I..." She ran ahead of me and spun back. "I don't know. I don't like what you did, but inside you're still a good pony, I'm sure of it! So... I'm giving you a second chance. I'll try to be better this time though! I promise. I just... want to be with you; you don't have to be my mother or anything, I just. Please? We'll both do better this time, I know it!"

I leaned down and gave her cheek a warm nuzzle. She giggled, and pushed me away just a little. "Yes, Serenity, we'll do better.... Thank you." For giving me another chance. After all that had happened. I didn't deserve it, but I was going to take it as it came. If I was going to build a better world for her, I had to start by giving her a better future. Even if I couldn't be all that she wanted, I could be what she needed. And what she seemed to need more than anything, was a pony to care for her. For so long she had been alone, and I could give her that.

"Run off to bed. It's late."

She didn't even argue with me. She just nodded, said, "Goodnight, Hired.... Thanks....," and ran off down the hall and leaving me alone. I wasn't sure what to do at this point. I really just wanted to make sure Serenity got back alright.

I wasn't sure where we stood. It was... different than before, but... better, I think. At least we were being

more honest, and that could only be good. I wasn't excited with her following me around again, but it was her choice and I knew she needed it. Hopefully this time I would avoid freaking out and shooting foals...

I limped my way over to Platinum Haze's room.

Opening the door with my skull, I limped inside to see the beautiful blue alicorn resting on her mattress. Her eyes were closed so I assumed she was asleep and collapsed on the bed beside her. With a groan I shut my eyes and let myself be comforted by the radiant warmth of her body. I didn't know if I was ready for a relationship yet, but she was too warm to pass up.

One of her wings lifted up and draped over me.

I felt myself blush. "I thought you were asleep."

"We do... I do not need sleep in this form." She shuffled closer to me. I didn't complain. "I was worried when you left suddenly.... What happened?"

"Fought a super villain. Nearly died in a vat of boiling water. The usual." I said with a yawn. I don't think she believed me. "Really. Ask the Batmare."

"You mean that mare who assaulted me when we first met?" Right, that's the one! I chuckled a bit, and lifted my head up so I could rest it on her side. "I am not sure how I feel about that, but at least you are safe. Mostly safe. Serenity vanished as well, I assume with you."

"She followed me."

"See. I knew you two would make up." Her feathers tickled a little bit. "I'm glad you're safe.... I am sorry about earlier."

"Don't be."

"It's just that I shouldn't have come on to you. Considering the circumstances, I understand your hesitation, and reluctance, and it was not wise of me to act the way I did. I-" Oh for Celestia's sake. I leaned up and kissed her cheek. There was slight pause before she started stammering and blushing.

"I... er... why did..."

"Stop that..." I rested my head on her again. "Stop over thinking." I was the master of not over thinking. And not thinking. "Just... be glad for what you have. And let me rest." I gave her a shy smile and she stuttered something before composing herself.

"I... right. Sorry. It's just." I felt her kiss the top of my head. Now I was blushing too. Great... I'm not a fillyfooler, she was just comfortable. Shut up. "Thanks..."

"Haze..." She hmm'ed at me. "What is the nature of a hero?"

"Uh..." Clearly that was not the question she was expecting. "Humility." That took The Batmare out of the equation. "I think a hero has to do what they do because it is what is required, and not for fame. Velvet Remedy is a good example. She followed the Destroyer silently and let her get all the fame. Velvet did the right thing for the right reasons. If anypony was ever a hero, then it was she."

"Mhmm." Was all I could say in reply. She was so very warm. So hard to stay awake. It was strange. I barely knew her... but after the memory thing, and everything that happened, I really needed that moment. I think she needed it too.

"Why?"

"It's a riddle." I yawned. "I hate riddles."

Level Up!:

New Perk: Violent Vigilante: You are a force of justice and do not take kindly to corruption or violence in the city you've claimed as your own. Against sleazy Dise gangs and disorganized criminals you do +15% damage and have a bonus to hit in SATS. Not that you use SATS...

Quest Perk: Sidekick!: Sometimes, just when your enemies think they have the upper hand, The Batmare appears in a flash to save the day! However, this perk is only active in and around Dise, and keeping this perk active means you must occasionally drop everything you are doing and go fight in the name of Justice!

((A/N: A big thanks to the lovely Kkat for creating FOE so I can dick around with it. And a huge thanks to my editors theBSDude, ErrantIndy, Mint Julep, and Menti without whom my story would suck. Seriously.))

## *Chapter 16: One Step Forward*

*“Every solution we come up with seems to create more problems than it solves “*

“Well, why not!” I had made a mistake. You see, after Serenity's sullen reaction last time we were in The BS, I had figured there wouldn't be a problem taking her there again. I was mistaken. She had lasted about three minutes before pouncing on Starscream and demanding to know how his cybernetics worked.

“Because.” I sighed. “You can't have wings.”

“But they'd be so *cool!*” she said way too loudly, jumping up for emphasis. We were supposed to be meeting Mr. House, but he was busy with... something. We didn't ask. And that left the five (Serenity, Flare, High Stakes, Starscream, and I) of us standing outside his office.

“They are pretty cool,” Flare said as he wiggled his feathers. That was actually kind of disturbing. Serenity stared blankly at him before going back to gushing over Starscream. “What! Metal is boring, all natural is where it's at!” Yes, clearly. At least High Stakes looked amused.

“You do not wish for these, child,” the cybernetic alicorn (who was not nearly as good-looking as a real alicorn) said.

“But I do!” I don't think she understood how annoying cybernetics were. Sure they looked cool. And they increased your physical strength, made you tougher, and a better fighter. They were also replaceable (Serenity managed to build me a leg out of two leg pieces she had scavenged back at the steel ranger base, but insisted I get a real replacement), and... I lost my train of thought.

“These wings...” he snapped them out, making them look almost sharp, “were a mistake.” He kept smiling as he leisurely strolled to the office door. “It was an attempt to give a unicorn flight, but the wings themselves were not enough, and attaching them caused pain throughout my body. It seems without pegasus magic a unicorn is too heavy to fly. House attempted to fix the problem by hollowing out my bones as you'd see in a bird, but this caused... more complications. Cybernetics had to be drilled into my bones, and more enhancements were added to help with blood cell growth. In the end I gained flight, but am in constant pain.” Serenity winced back a bit at the story, but Starscream still seemed to be smiling.

“You're awfully pleasant for all that pain.” High Stakes glasses shined in the hallway light.

“Med-X... and mint-als for the mood.” The cybernetic alicorn said. “I may be addicted, but the alternative is much worse. I have to undergo detox every few months to make sure the pain-killers don't decrease in effectiveness.”

“Fascinating.” I yawned. It did make me feel a bit sorry for him, and glad that my own cybernetics didn't come at such a cost. Yet. Part of Mr. House's deal included a (experimental) cybernetic eye, and that could go wrong in so many ways. So long as it got me the job though, I guess it'd be okay.

Serenity backed up between my forelegs and rubbed her head against me. “I don't want wings anymore... can I have a leg?” No no no. “Just kidding~.” I had no idea if she was serious or not. I know she liked cybernetics (if being obsessed counts as liking), but I really didn't want her to get any. At all. Ever.

And there I go jinxing things. We're off to a fabulous start.

Well, she had insisted on sitting in on my eye surgery. Hopefully that would turn her off wanting one of her own, because apparently it wasn't going to be pretty. Considering the first part involved cutting into my eye and removing the remaining tissue and... Starscream had explained the rest of the surgery, I just couldn't remember. Something about connecting to my nerves, or brain stuff. And then... something.

“How much longer?” Flare asked, standing on the ceiling. I don't know why he couldn't just stand still. It was like a compulsion of his to constantly do silly little tricks. “As much as I like waiting here, I could be off... doing, like stuff. And things. I have this idea for a disguised mine and I need some supplies.” Yeah, I believed that.

“Whaaat? You aren't going to stay to watch?!” Serenity seemed legitimately shocked.

“It may be difficult to believe, young Serenity,” Stakes said, “but some ponies do not enjoy the sight of ponies being opened up wide and fitted with sharp metal objects.”

“Why not!?” Apparently, Serenity was a bit morbid. Or didn't fully understand. Perhaps a little bit of both.

“Er.” Flare scratched the back of his head.

“Well...” High Stakes couched.

Hah. My daughter managed to creep out my two companions. This was a cause for celebration... and I just called her my daughter. Even my brain was against me.

“It is not so strange for foals to find hobbies.” Starscream smiled down at my da-... Serenity. “When I was your age, I was quite enamoured with the construction of buildings.” There was a sad smile on his lips. “I am sure it shall not be long before you get your cutie mark. If you wish it when you are older, we may be able to set you up as an apprentice.” Her grey eyes went wide and watery. Then her eyes met mine, and they went even wider.

“Yes, Serenity. If you want.” She started jumping for joy, but I had to quickly silence her with my hoof. “Just. Don't get any yourself. They hurt.” She nodded but still looked absolutely giddy. Apparently this was a big deal... even if it was coming a pony who actually had no power in the cybernetic department of House's empire. Though I am sure he could swing it, if he really tried.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!” She hopped around me, getting strange looks from a pony in a white coat down the hall. “Yes!” She beamed up at me. I wondered if she would get a cybernetic cutie mark. She liked it well enough, but it was hard to explain her sound ability. Magic like that wouldn't really help a cybernetic spell set, and yet it was the only one she knew. Not that it mattered, a pony didn't have to do a job based entirely on their cutie mark.

The door creaked open.

A tiny blue mare with two really advanced robotic legs walked out. “Starscream!” She leaped up hugged the alicorn (who hugged back dispassionately). “How have you been?! Are these the new recruits? You've given them a good scaring, I hope.” She giggled and stepped off him, and tilted her head at us before running a hoof through her black and white mane. I wasn't sure what a 'locked door' cutie mark was supposed to represent, but I'm sure it was easier to explain than three rocks. “I am Tight Lips.”

“Er, hi.” I stared blankly at her until Serenity kicked me. “I'm Hired Gun.”

“Oh!” She perked up. “You're the one who killed Roy, right? Hah! I was trying to convince House to let me have you, but somepony claimed dibs.” She stuck her tongue out at Starscream. “Oh look! You have friends, how nice? Oh. One of them is High Stakes, not nearly as nice.” She giggled, and I could just imagine High Stakes' glasses shining at that. “As you probably know, I am the head of the Hizai

Internal Department. Handling defence and security for all of Mr. House's assets. If Mayhem had had me, he wouldn't be dealing with cleaning up the mess The Batmare and The Laughing Stallion made of his water plant." Yeah. They were the ones to make a mess all right.

I did not know that, so I stared blankly at her and pretended I understood.

"She doesn't know, does she?" Everypony else shook their heads. "Starscream," she playfully smacked at him with one of her cybernetic legs. "you dog, always keeping your newbies in the dark." She turned to me and gave me a grin that was way too wide for her face. "I handle all security for House, and I hope Sky told you 'bout infiltration?" I nodded. "Their leader, Mr. Star, you might not even see him... and if you do, he's doing his job wrong. He handles the smallest number of operatives, but highly specialized. They infiltrate other gangs and organizations. Don't tell anypony, but we have an operative working beside NCA General Scoiatel and another currently deep in the heart of Minotaur territory." I wasn't going to tell anypony, but I couldn't say for Flare who sure liked to blab stuff like that.

"I see..."

"Hah!" She patted me on the back. "You're a good pony. I heard The Boss has a job for you, so try not to screw it up and die, okay? Maybe if you manage that, we'll go out drinking!" I'd like that. The drinking. The mare herself was a bit too hyperactive for my tastes.

She trotted off down the hall and proceeded to glomp a doctory-pony. Right. Strange pony.

"Don't mistake her appearance." High Stakes warned me. "When I first got this job, I had intended to shove past her, annoyed that my appointment was being rescheduled. She broke three of my ribs before I hit the ground." I once broke my ribs so hard they had to be removed. So I could sympathize with him. I made a mental note not to pick a fight with Tight Lips unless I had to.

"You're just a wimp, Stakey," Starscream said with a tiny grin. "House is free, follow me." Flare nickered at me as we followed Starscream into House's antechamber. The huge computer and monitor on one side of the wall was currently turned off, and the stallion himself was standing beside it looking out the window at Dise. I would rather not join him...

I wondered what it was like being a ghoul. He had lived in the city for over two hundred years. He'd seen the fall of civilization and watched as it slowly brought itself back from the edge, only to begin to tear at the seams. It must have been hard for him, living so long and seeing so much, but not being able to enact the change he so desperately wanted. I wondered what he'd give for that chance. I was only one pony, but I had to help him. He was the only pony who had shown himself competent enough to unite this fractured city.

Fear my critical thinking.

"Mr. House," Skyscream said, adopting a grim expression.

"Yes." The ghoul turned and gave me a sickening grimace from his partially melted face. "I knew you would see reason. You are lucky. After your show last night, I heard Molly was getting ready to send her assassins against you. With me, she wouldn't dare. Not so brazenly."

"So she's still in danger, but now if she gets killed, it'll be all quiet like?" Flare smirked to my left.

"Enclave rat. Do not speak unless spoken to." Flare gulped and nodded, staring hard at his hooves. "We shall proceed with your surgery. Your new eye is experimental technology using a more refined system than those Cerberus fools used. So no, it will not glow red." That was good. "After that, I have a job for you. High Stakes, you will accompany her in this job to make sure it is completed even if she fails." Thanks for the vote of confidence.

"As you say." High Stakes bowed his head slightly in deference.

“A large raider gang has been moving slowly south from the hills bordering Equestria. The NCA sent an envoy to them, requesting that they state their intentions. The envoy came back missing an ear, with a map declaring much of the north their territory. The NCA may move against them. This issue here is the town of Bridle Hope. It is an important town, more so than they realize. It holds the centre between north and south, and east and west. I do not care who holds the territory, but I need to make sure that town is free. Or, barring that, that all caravans going through will be free of taxes or fees.” I nodded. Kill some raiders, free some citizens, all in a days work.

“I can do that.”

“I hope so.” He motioned his head to my left. “For all the money I am putting into you, I hope it's worth it. I'll be handling the surgery myself.” Really? He was an earth pony ghoul, I wasn't sure he would be able... but I was not going to tell him that. “I am the most experienced of my doctors, and the procedure is new. It is safer for me to do it, and now. It may take several hours, but if this works your recovery time will be short. Let us get started.”

“Right now?” I was just slightly nervous about this. I mean. Having my face cut open and stuff would have to hurt. I wondered if I'd get pain medication or something. That'd be good.

“Yes, weren't you informed?” I shook my head, and he shrugged. “Just follow me, Starscream lead those who wish to watch to the viewing platform.”

So I followed House down the plain halls of The BS and into a room on the same floor.

It was a large, sterile room, painted all in white and decked to the nines in fancy-looking medical equipment stuff. The bed I was to lay on was fairly plain (also white) and had an eyeball on a tray beside it. Not to mention a shit load of wires. Also in the room were four white-clad ponies hidden behind medical masks, and what looked like stadium seating in the room above, with a thick glass window separating the two rooms. Serenity waved to me, so I gave her a slight smile. Her face was literally pressed up against the glass. I guess she was excited...

As soon as I walked in, there was a great deal of fussing. The doctor ponies started touching me, taking off my eye patch and my makeshift leg (One doctor looked more disgusted at my leg than at my eye remains) and helped me onto the bed. On my back... moving on.

“Here.” One pony said putting a mask over my muzzle. “Lie back.”

“Okay.” I rested uneasily on the bed, unused to being on my back. “Uh, what're you doing?” I knew what they were doing, but I didn't like it. Two of the ponies were slowly strapping me in with thick leather bindings so tight I could feel it cutting into my skin.

“Don't worry.” The pony who helped me with the mask said. “Just in case you move in your sleep.” I nodded. “It'll be fine. Don't worry. Tell me where are you from?”

“Uh...” I blinked. Why were my eyes so droopy? “Marefort.”

“Can you count how many ponies were in Marefort?” Sure... I could. Fuzzy-headed pony. It was... Um...

“One... two... three.” Four. Five. “Six.” Wait, did I say those two out loud? I needed to start again.

“One. Two. Two.” My eyes closed. Just needed to rest. Then I could finish counting. “Seven.”

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“What are you doing?”

I looked at Wildfire lying on the ground behind me, then ignored her. Before me was a pile of rubble that had to be sorted through. Lowering my body, I squeezed under an iron girder and started. After

getting it snugly in place on my neck, I slowly started to lift it, gritting my teeth to keep my neck tight.

“You can't lift that.”

“Grrr.” Every muscle in my body was complaining, and it felt like they were on fire. I had been growing at an exceptional rate, but I was still barely older than a filly. I could do this though. It was just a stupid bar. I could lift it.

“You're going to hurt yourself.”

Well, I couldn't with that attitude! I continued to ignore her, as I ignored most ponies, and did not stop ignoring her until I lifted the girder and tossed it aside. I was sweaty but damn triumphant. Standing up tall, I looked down at Wildfire. “You were saying?”

She laughed prettily and shook her head. “I stand corrected. But... why?” I was scavenging for material. It's all we ever did in Marefort. There were enough guns and ammo stored around here to last another hundred years.

I turned back to the small section of collapsed building. “Why what?” I poked my nose into the pile before picking up some metal wires with my mouth and throwing them away. “I'm working.”

“You know you don't work today, right?” With a growl of annoyance I took my nose out of the dirt and looked her over. While I was growing bigger, she was getting taller and sleeker. Her coat seemed to shine, and her mane was just so... so something. The problem was that she had a cast on her left foreleg, and that meant she couldn't do any work. If she didn't do work she didn't get paid, which meant she didn't eat.

“You do,” I said simply before going back to digging through piles of rubble. Peering through a small opening in the rubble, I thought I saw something... boxy. So I started digging with renewed vigour.

“What?” What was she, stupid?

I didn't have the time to look back at her while I was digging. “Working for you. So you can afford to eat.”

“I can work.” She sounded almost a little insulted.

I tossed a chunk of concrete off to the side. “Idiot.” She snickered at that. “You can't. Leg is broken. Schedules are locked. You have scavenging all month. You can't work. Can't eat.” I grunted, trying to paw at the box. “Rations aren't enough. You'll be hungry.”

“I'll survive on them.” Ack. I caught my leg on something sharp and pulled it out. “Why do you even care?” I think I was bleeding. Looking down I could see blood start to swim down my leg, definitely bleeding. Fucking hell. “I won't die, won't be comfortable, but I won't die.”

“Idiot,” I repeated, shuffling my bleeding leg close so she wouldn't see it. “You need strength. Heal faster. Then you can work again.” If I did her work for her, then she would heal sooner, so I wouldn't have to. There was nothing wrong with that train of thought. “I'm helping.”

“Why?” I turned my head to give her my 'what the hell are you talking about' face. “You barely even talk to me. Or anypony. Then, out of the blue, you start helping me? That doesn't even make sense.” Makes perfect sense, stop questioning it. “You do this all the time, too! After Smooth Tongue...” Her voice trailed away in thought. “You spent a week standing in front of my house and glaring at anypony who came close, so I could rest.” I wanted to explain that her father died, and she clearly needed to rest without being bothered. “And, when Nox got lost a few months ago, you ran off to find her!” Well, she was lost. Lost ponies needed to be found. “What about that time with Star Belle?” Well she accidentally shot herself, and I was the only pony that remembered the safety instructions...

I tried to apply pressure to my cut. It was kind of deep... that couldn't be good. "Someone had to."

"But why you?" I wish she'd stop questioning this. "You don't talk to ponies otherwise."

"Shut up." I tried to reach down towards the back again, but pain shot through my leg, and I drew it back. This sucked. "I'm helping. Does it matter why?" I turned to see her nod. "Fine. Because I feel like it." It wouldn't be so hard, working a double shift. I was nearly the size of two ponies my age, so it only made sense. "Let it go."

"Silver..." I shook my head.

"If you want to do this, keep arguing."

She huffed. "Fine. Fine! I'll just sit here and..." She paused and I looked back at her to see her pretty green eyes to go wide. "Are you bleeding?" I looked down and saw that blood had pretty much soaked my entire right leg. And most of my left since I'd tried to put pressure on it. And it was pooling on the ground.

I looked up sheepishly. "No..."

"Silver... get over here." She turned to dig into her saddle bags, but I shook my head. "Silver." Kept shaking. "Hon, it won't do any good if you can't work either." Yeah. That's true. I guess. "Hon." She started using pouty lips. They just weren't fair.

"Fine." I stood up slowly and walked over, careful to avoid any of the sharp pieces of junk I threw away. By the time I got there she had gotten a bundle of medical supplies out of her saddle bags, and was resting them on her cast. Standing over her, I let my blood pool in the dirt. "Uh..."

"Lay down, please. Close." Yeah, close. I laid down, putting my bleeding leg out towards her. "This looks deep."

"Sorry..."

She took out a cloth rag and pressed it into the wound which just made it hurt more. "Be still." Easy to say when she wasn't the one hurt... other than her broken leg. I had nothing. "Does it hurt?" I grimaced and nodded a bit. "I'm sorry, it's just..." her voice trailed off as she looked up into my eyes. She had the most beautiful green eyes. I... didn't like her like that, it was just that... looking at her eyes sometimes I lost track of time and....

"It's fine." I flushed, looking away. She might have been blushing, too, but it was impossible to tell through the color of her coat.

She nodded, then took out a healing potion and poured just a little bit into the wound. It stung a bit, but not that bad. "That should close the wound. Just be careful around the leg." I nodded. "And... I... thank you. For helping me. Even if you're weird... and..." She looked away. "And I uh..." She turned her lovely green eyes back to me.

So I kissed her.

It was sort of sloppy. I think it was my first kiss, and it ended way too soon, before I really understood what happened. I pulled back.

"I, uh... sorry." I smiled bashfully up at her.

"It's fine." She nuzzled my cheek. "It's fine..." There was something wet on my shoulder. I thought, for a second, it was tears.

But when I turned to her, there was a gaping hole in her head, and blood was flowing down over me. I could hear it dripping. Drip. Drip. Drip.

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“Grah!” I gasped and opened my eyes. I was glad I didn't shoot up out of bed, because I was not in the mood to be a cliché. I felt a burning in my shoulder and thought it felt familiar, but chalked it up to being in a hospital and around medical ponies. I was more concerned with the throbbing in the back of my skull. I spied a med-x on the table by my bed, and used it as recommended.

Taking a deep breath, I steadied myself. Just a dream. I hated my dreams. I would just like one without somepony dying. You know? Is that so much to ask? Of course it was. I wouldn't be Hired Gun if I wasn't haunted by the ghosts of my forgotten past. I hoped one day I would be able to forget the past, but apparently it was not that day. Which is lovely.

After calming myself down, my eye slowly got used to the darkened room. It wasn't the same one I was put out in, that was for sure. It looked vaguely hospital-ish and I saw apparitions of medical, equipment-y stuff all around. It was a small room though, and it seemed I didn't have a roommate. That was good. I disliked ponies watching me sleep.

With a sigh, I fell back into the pillow. I doubted I was going to sleep that night. Just alone with my thoughts. Huzzah...

The burning started to get stronger. Hmm.

There was a knock on my door. I looked down at my pipbuck to confirm it was well past midnight.

“Uh, come in?”

The door opened and no pony entered. At least, I didn't see any pony enter, but I heard hoofsteps and the burning in my shoulder intensified, making me wince. A few seconds later the door closed silently.

“Platinum Haze?” I hazarded a guess. It was either her, a minotaur, or an assassin trying to kill me. I was really hoping for the first one.

The veil of invisibility dropped and I was lying in bed before a rather beautiful alicorn. A welcome sight for my (literally) sore eyes.

“Ah,” she said. “Are we interrupting? We hope we have not awoken you from your rest it is-”

“I.”

“We are sorr-oh. Sorry. I am not awakening you am I?” Her gaze lowered and she looked a bit saddened. “Diamond Sky has returned, and has told me to take some time off. We... I do not require sleep and found ourselves rather bored, so we wished to remark upon the status of your operation.” Well she was trying at least. “I hope w-I am not intruding, or pressing against the boundaries of my social limitations.”

“I ain't even sure what you just said,” I said, and carefully scooted up the bed so I was sitting up with my back resting against the headboard. “Surgery went good. I guess. I'm not dead.”

“I have noticed you have acquired a new leg, it looks to be the same model as your last one.” Huh. I looked down at my leg and saw a brand new (relatively speaking) cybernetic leg. I wasn't quite sure when I got that. Lifting it up, I swung it around a few times for practice. It certainly felt like the same leg. “It is much more practical than the one your filly constructed.” Yeah, but I liked Serenity's mish-mash. I was thinking of hauling it around in case my stupidity broke my leg again. She continued after I nodded. “Is there pain?”

A fair bit. Even with the med-x it was pretty bad. “Felt like I headbutted a vertibuck. Or wrestled a hellhound.” She smiled prettily at that. “Don't worry. They gave me pain-killers.” I waved to the table beside me with the empty med-x syringe.

"I see. So long as you are taking them as directed." I rolled my eyes. "Hired..."

"Everypony and their lectures. Barely know you two days. And you're starting too."

"Perhaps if you did not make it so easy." I chuckled a bit as she moved close and laid beside my bed. It put us at about eye-level because alicorns are really freaking tall. I kind of liked it actually. There were so few ponies even close to my size, and it was refreshing to be overshadowed some times. "So long as you are well. We have heard you are to be leaving tomorrow?"

Something like that. I didn't know if I should have been looking forward to it or not. The work I was doing with House should hopefully start setting right what was wrong in Dise, but it meant dragging Serenity (willingly) into the fire. As much as I loved murdering raiders, it churned my gut knowing Serenity had to come. Hopefully now that she was armed, she would be able to protect herself. And we were going to have a long boring discussion on why she should be hiding in every fight, not standing in the open all the time...

"Yes." I answered eventually. I had forgotten to speak again. "To the north. Fight some raiders. Protect a village. Hero-y stuff." The dark room cast a shadow over the blue pony's face, obscuring her expression. "Ever hear of Bridle Hope?"

"Yes," she answered, a bit quickly. "Please be wary, it is where Serenity was imprisoned, and we do not wish her undue emotional distress." Wait, what? How did she know that? I muttered something and stared blankly at her. Apparently she too could read my mind. "I was in your memories, remember? It was a point I remember quite clearly." Right. Gotcha. I kept purposely forgetting about that incident.

"Yeah. Good point." I hadn't even thought of that. I really need to ask Serenity about what happened down there. She never spoke of it, and when she did tears were usually involved. I hated seeing her cry (the irony of me constantly making her cry was not lost on me). "Sorry. Didn't even think of it." It made sense though. It would be like dragging me to Stable 42 and asking me to act rationally.

Not that I ever acted rationally.

"It is fine. It is why I reminded you. We worry about taking the filly along, it will be dangerous." I nodded. "Harmful." I couldn't argue. "Potentially life threatening." Yeah... "Are you sure she will not be better off with Diamond Sky and me?"

"She would be." I said. Shuffling a bit, I brought myself up and steeled my face. "But. She's lonely. I think. Since she was young she never had a pony... to, like, care for her. She never got the love and attention she needed. It's why she attached herself to me. Haze." I sighed. So many words. "I think you're good at what you do. But, I think... I think Serenity needs more than that. Ya know? So if she wants to follow. I can't say no."

"We understand bu-"

"I will protect her." I reached out my hoof and lifted her chin up. "I will. I promise. Discord himself could fly down from the sky shooting lightning from his eyes, and I would still protect her." I gave her a weak smile. "I promise."

"Yes. We are sorry. We worry about foals; it is part of the job. We hope Serenity will be happy with you and will find what she is looking for her. Just." She smiled at me. "Don't forget we are always an option... and even if you don't let us help, you could visit or..." In the dim light I couldn't tell if she was blushing, but it amused me to think so.

"I'll visit. When I'm in the city. Wouldn't miss it." Moonlight filtered through the window making her face light up. "You worry too much."

"And you not enough." Eh, I couldn't argue with that.

“Why did you come and visit anyway?” I closed my eyes, slipping back further into my bed. I didn't really care that she did, though I found her timing eerily impeccable. Unless she was waiting in my room, and just stepped out when I woke up...

“I... we er.” She looked away. “As we said, to make sure you were okay.” I'm sure that wasn't it. Even I was able to see through such an obvious ruse. I awarded points for tenacity, but I still wasn't interested. Okay I was interested, how could I not be?! It'd be like banging Luna... I'm a horrible pony, forget I said that. I needed a cold shower.

“I understand.” I smirked. “Just teasing.” It wasn't that I disliked her. Or disliked companionship, it was just I wasn't a fillyfooler. And if you don't believe that, would you believe that I didn't think she wanted a fling (I'd be okay with that) and that I wasn't emotionally ready for a full fledged relationship? I mean, sure we'd start small but the idea was just... weird. And kind of scary. And in the end what she wanted was something comforting. A stabilizing factor at a place where she feels she had lost control (all guesses on my part, but really... a few weeks ago she was part of a hive mind super entity. It wasn't that hard to figure out), and I was not, well, stable. I was emotionally broken, afraid of commitment, and prone to sudden bouts of... er, death. I wasn't what she needed.

I was just the only pony nearby that didn't try to shoot and/or kick her on sight.

“Hired?” Huh, I turned my head back to her. “Oh. You went quiet suddenly, and we thought you fell asleep.” I really need to time my bursts of deep introspection for when it was not my turn to talk. “I did not cross the line coming here, did I? I know it is late but...”

“It's fine. Sorry. Thinking.” There was a smile of hope on her face. “I'm glad you came but...” Watch as I crush the hopes of magical goddess ponies under the pretence that I would hurt them later.

That was a familiar argument. Sorry, I can't commit right now because I'm a bad pony and I'll hurt you later. Last time I travelled down that path, I killed a foal and went weepy for two days straight. I shut my mouth and cried out in annoyance, slamming my head back against the pillows, and sending pain lancing up my skull. Post surgery sucks.

“Hired, have we annoyed you.” She began to rise slowly. “We didn't mean to, we shall go an-”

“It's fine. Just me. Thinking,” I said. She raised an eyebrow, which meant I had to respond. “I hate thinking.” There was a subtle smirk on her muzzle. “Can I be honest for a second?” She nodded so I continued. “I am getting the feeling you like... want something. Between us.” She gulped but nodded slightly. “It's just. I don't think you want me. At least. Not me, in particular. It's like. You've been saying how everything's been moving fast. So. Maybe you aren't looking for me. I think... I shouldn't be telling you how you feel.”

“No...” She looked a bit ashamed. “We would be insulted were you not correct in some manner. It would be nice if we had some stability in our life and... yes, we are sorry. It is not fair to pressure you in this manner.” She stood upright. “It as a mistake.”

“Why not just hook up with Diamond Sky.” Alicorn on alicorn action... my mind was going to very bad places.

“Ah. Well unlike me, she is waiting patiently for Velvet Remedy to find a way create male alicorns.” As I absentmindedly wondered if male alicorns were... proportional, I realized my brain was in a very strange place after surgery. Fuck. Wait, dammit.

“I see. Um.” My brain needed to reboot. “It's just. I ain't stable. So you won't find stability with me... and you know. I'm all fucked. In the head. You saw that yourself. You have my pity... So. It's not that I'm not interested.” Even though I wasn't a fillyfooler, you can't turn down a date from a freaking

goddess without thinking about it first! And she was so pretty. And... it twisted my stomach to tell her no, because a part of me wanted her so damn much. But... it wasn't her I wanted. It was Wildfire, and the warmth of companionship. She couldn't live up to a ghost, and it was wrong to try and force her to. "It's that. I guess I'm not ready. And I'd end up hurting you."

"We doubt you have that ability, we have been through more than you can imagine an-oh. You mean emotionally don't you?" I nodded. "Well. Even still, we do not see ho-"

"Well. I could freak out. Then sleep with a hooker to drive you away." She winced a bit at my blunt assessment. The knot in my stomach twisted harder. Sometimes I really hated myself.

"You wouldn't," she said, defiantly. Sure, she knew me better than most due to magical mishaps, but she didn't know me that well.

"I... don't know. After what I did to push Serenity away? I'm not taking that risk. Don't want to hurt you." I closed my eyes. "Sorry. It's not you, it's me." She started laughing. This wasn't a joke! I was trying to be serious. I huffed and felt her kiss my forehead gently.

"Sorry. It is just that claim is a tad overused, and we could not help ourselves. We will respect your wishes, but just want you to understand something." I opened an eye. "If you wish to get past your issues, you can't hide away from them. We are of the belief that you eventually must confront your issues and try to push through them if you are to be who you wish to be." She smiled just a bit. "W-I. I may be biased."

"I-" I was cut off by a goddess.

"I will think about, ' you are about to say, am I correct?" I nodded. "We had guessed as much, for a pony who claims not to be smart, you most certainly think about many things." She looked behind her shoulder. "We must be going. The foals will be up soon, and dealing with so many in the morning... I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy." There was a faint smile on her lips when she vanished from sight.

"I'll think about it. Take care of yourself. And..."

There was a haunting voice in the room. "May the goddess watch over you; please be safe, Silver."

The door opened and closed, and I fell back onto my bed, hard, wondering if I had just made a really stupid mistake.

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Morning came quickly, and I didn't sleep. I stayed up all night, mourning the fact I turned down alicorn love... that's a lie. I actually spent most of the night worried I'd hurt her. I really hoped not. I was so tired of hurting ponies. But... I guess it didn't matter. We'd still be friends, and I'd still talk in cliches.

Light filtered in from the window curtains and aimed directly for my eyes, making me wince and turn away. Brightness sucked. I scratched at my eye patch and wondered if I would be able to take it off soon. I heard that before there were healing potions, it'd take days or weeks (or months) to recover from surgery, but things had changed. I'd be adventuring by lunch. Hopefully. My head was still throbbing.

I laid back in my bed. I just wanted to be released.

It was another hour before the door opened. I was staring at the wall when it happened. It was white. I hated it.

"Ah! You are awake!" I turned to see a doctor-y pony walk through the door. "We were worried an-"

“MOMMA!” A pink blur sped past the doctor, flew through the air, and landed hard on my chest. Her grey eyes looked wild. “You're okay, we were so worried Mr. House had to-” I stuck my hoof in her mouth. She was being a bit too loud. Slowly I took it out. “You almost didn't make it!” I... what!? She latched her forelegs around my neck and squeezed.

I turned to the Doctor and saw Flare and High Stakes follow him in. The grey doctor in his full white uniform looked a little embarrassed as he began. “There were complications. A previous implant was making the eye install troublesome, and near impossible. We had to alter it...” But my intelligence! “But that required removing pieces of your skull and screwing it back together.” I winced and instinctively wondered how much med-x it'd take for that wound to go away. “It went well after that, and we installed your new eye without further issue. But in the process, it seemed as if we may have deactivated some of the functions of the chip, but we couldn't remove it to be certain due to the time constraints. Do you know what it did?”

“It was an Intelligence chip.” Flare started laughing. He came in just to laugh at me. I could feel it in my bones.

“Oh. It was not a model House was familiar with so we did not insert a replacement.” I could feel my intelligence leaking out of my ears. I was going to miss it so much. “However, when your new eye is activated, it should provide your brain with extra computing power, that can be used when it's not using its more labour-intensive functions.” Oh! I guess I got to keep my smart... ness. Except when I was working out my eye. Or. Something. I wasn't sure so I'm just going to assume it stayed the same. Easy!

“So... I'm okay.”

“You are awake and not brain dead; it would appear so.” The doctor placed a hoof on Serenity's (who was still hugging my neck) head. “This one was very brave throughout the tense moments. Heck, I think she was fascinated more than worried.”

“I was worried.” She lifted her head up to explain. “But I knew you'd make it. We've been through worse.” The doctor raised an eyebrow, and that was a perfect time for Flare to step up flapping his wings.

“True. Remember the tunnels under Dise with that crazy cult ghoul who did cult... things?” Serenity winced and Flare chuckled. “Don't stress, Serenity. He deserved it.” There was a look of rising horror on the doctor's face as High Stakes also stepped up, his glasses shining.

“When we stood against those landsharks she displayed remarkable fortitude and... accuracy.” That was a good time, with a bad ending. Honestly those land sharks were disturbing. What would Dise do if they ever moved towards the city? Die. I guess.

The doctor however looked very concerned with the story and was looking at me with a mixture of shock and amazement. Apparently dragging a filly around on horrific adventures wasn't an 'in' thing. “I...” He shook his head and tried to maintain a professional calm. “I guess...” he said. “Never mind that. We need to do some tests on your eye to make sure it is working at capacity.”

“Good.” After helping Serenity off me, I rolled out of bed and landed hard on my new leg. I leaned on it, then kicked it against the floor. Yup. It's certainly working right, but something felt different. It seemed just a bit heavier. “How do-”

“Oh!” Serenity jumped up. “Can I do it!?”

“Only if we want Hired to explode,” Flare said, inciting the filly to use her powerful glare against him. It wasn't very effective. “No offence but I think we should let the trained... you were trained right? The trained professional do the activating. That way if she *does* explode, we can sue.” He laughed. “Right?”

“No courts in Dise,” High Stakes explained.

“Bugger.” Flare kicked at the ground. “Oh well, points for trying.”

“Your friends are all insane.” The doctor sighed and pulled a long skinny device thingy out of his coat. “Take your eye patch off and...” He looked up at me. “Kneel down.” I picked at my eye patch until I could get it off, before kneeling down. The doctor continued, “High Stakes, there is a med-x on the table, please get it.”

“You are mistaken, doctor; the only thing here is an empty syringe,” Stakes said. I gave the doctor a weak smile and he just sort of glared before sighing.

“In my coat pocket.” I felt the familiar burning of Stake's magic and looked up to see him standing beside me. He jammed a med-x into my shoulder. Sweet relief.

Then the doctor jammed the device into my eye.

Half my vision turned white. For a split second I began to see to my right again. I was about to cry out in joy, but I just started crying out as pain lanced through my head like somepony had slammed it through a rock crusher. I dropped to a knee and squeezed my eyes tight as I emitted a high pitched squeal of pain. That was until I felt another needle jam into my side and the pain fell down to a heavy throbbing. Blindingly painful, but at least I was able to think.

“I'm sorry, Miss Hired!” The doctor sounded really defensive. A part of me was begging me not to hurt the nice doctor pony. “The med-x should have taken care of the pain, I did not think we'd have to use two.”

“It's.” I gritted my teeth as the pain slowly faded away. “Ok... what the fuck!” I took a step back and stared at the doctor, my new eye moving awkwardly in its socket. There was a strange orange box highlighting the white coated pony, and above him a little tag that said 'Dr. Pony'. This was almost like that time I turned on crazy time-stopping mode. Only now I had little moving ticks at the bottom of my vision in amber and red. They kept moving around.

“Oh. Yes.” The doctor smoothed back his mane nervously. “The new features. You'll see in addition to your EFS--.”

“What.” I stared blankly at him.

“Eyes Forward Sparkle.” Serenity giggled. “Ain't 'cha have those ticks in your vision before? Cause of your pipbuck?” I shook my head and she giggled more. So did Flare. “Basically the little ticks there correspond ta ponies in your location, an' shows if they're friendly or not. Green, or yellow is friendly, red is meanie.” Red is... I looked back at my EFS and noticed the red one was gone. Right.

“Your daughter is smart,” the doctor said. Flare seemed to be amused so I tried to glare at him hard enough to make his tick turn red. “Ahem.” I turned my head back to the Doctor Pony. “The icons around us correspond to our threat level. Amber is non-threatening, brown is low threat, red is middle threat, and purple is high level.” Blah blah blah. “This can be determined via a magical fields that measures po-” I zoned out as he explained how it worked. It wasn't really important. “Also, you'll be able to utilize SATS even if your pipbu-”

“Wait! I can make everything go all time-stoppy again!”

And everypony stared at me. Like I was an idiot.

Because I was.

“Yes...” the doctor said really slowly making me flush a little. “Yes, you can.” There was a look on his face that seemed like he was wondering if I really was supposed to be an elite cybernetic agent of

house. "What exactly did you use your pipbuck for?"

"...the radio," I mumbled under my breath. "And..." There was something else. What was it. "Oh." I facehoofed. "The map." That would have helped me two nights ago when I was fighting crime with The Batmare.

"Right..." Doc sighed heavily. Off to the side of the room, I saw High Stakes leaning against a wall being all bored-like. "The eye is powered via the same power source as your leg. There is a small wire under your skin from your head to leg, but should be deep enough it won't be cut easily. It has a small backup power source that will last a day if it does... the wire may itch." Dammit, it was itching now. Why did he have to say anything? "We have provided your companions with power gems, and painkillers." I reminded myself to make sure I got a hold of those right away. "And... House wishes to speak with you about functions of the implant I am not privy too." He huffed. No doubt offended that I would have the information despite being something of an idiot.

"Right." The Doctor walked away, and I watched his tick move on my EFS until it flashed out of sight. That was pretty cool actually, but a bit confusing. It didn't seem to tell between levels, so a lot of the ticks from the few floors above and below me meshed into each other, and I couldn't even see the ticks behind me. So it wouldn't help if I got sneak attacked.

There was a strange silence in the room that lasted for minutes. My companions' eyes were watching me. Very Closely.

"Uh..." I said slowly shifting a bit from side to side. My leg did feel weird. Maybe that's what they were staring at. "Yes?"

"Your eye..." Flare said slowly. "It's green..." I... wait what. I looked down at Serenity who nodded. "Very, very, very green," Flare finished.

Why was my eye green? Before I had a chance to respond, High Stakes floated a mirror in front of me. There, sunken into my face among a series of thin white scars, was my eye. It certainly looked like an eye, but the pupil seemed strangely light, the white part had small green veins in it (that glowed) and the iris itself was green and glowing.

"Why... is my eye green?" I asked slowly.

High Stakes answered, "I did give House your correct eye colour... it seems he had forgotten my recommendation, or it was not an option. Whatever the case, I do not think changing the colour is possible at this time." But. I liked my eye colour. It was one of my most redeeming features... I guess it didn't matter anyway. It was better than no eye at all...

"Right." I leaned over and picked up my discarded eye patch with my mouth. "Serenity." I kneeled down to look her in the eye. "Help me put this on."

"But Mom- Hired, why would you do that?! Your eye is so cool now and has all these special powers an-" I gave her a hard look. With a heavy and exaggerated sigh she lifted the patch up and slipped it over my mechanical eye. At the same time the boxes around her, Flare, and High Stakes vanished, as did their name tags. The tics in the bottom of my vision stayed there though, and continued to be a distraction. "What a waste." Serenity said when she finished tying my patch on.

"It's my penitance for what I did..." I tried to explain. It was... important. I lost my eye right after killing Post Haste, and... and keeping my new one covered would be a reminded of the lives I'd taken. Of my mistakes. In my mind it was important.

"Penance." I turned my head to High Stakes, and he continued. "The word you're looking for is penance. To atone for one's sins." I kept staring at him. "What?"

“Are you a dictionary?” I asked. Flare started cracking up laughing. I considered that a win.

“I guess,” Serenity said as she kicked softly at the ground. “I guess. If it's so you can do better, that's okay... but you gotta take it off when you're fighting. The systems in it could save your life!” I nodded. “Please...”

I ruffled her mane with my good hoof causing her to squeal and squirm away. “I know, Serenity.” She smiled softly at me. “I know.” Just then, the door opened.

A ragged ghoulish stormer stormed through the door so fast, I thought his black and gold hat was going to fly off his head. He turned sharply at me and set me with a hard look that was just shy of a glare. “You are awake late,” House said. I've been awake all night, but that was just logic talking. “Your eyes don't match. I thought you had green eyes...” he said looking at the eye that wasn't hiding behind an eye patch. Lavender was not green at all.

“Thanks for that,” I said.

He snorted and shook his head. “Right. Moving on.” He started talking. Fast. I guess I was an annoyance. “I installed an earbud into your... ear.” We had a new contender for captain obvious.

“Before the war, a wealthy idiot placed a large number of two way radio amplifiers in and around Dise. I modified these to carry my special channel, and amplified it to take the signal across much of the Dise wasteland. We will not be able to be in contact directly, but the channel will direct you using a series of agent-specific keywords which I have programmed into your pipbuck for reference. The ear bud will allow you to listen to my instructions discreetly. For the sake of the channel your codename is 'Star-Mare'.” I wasn't sure what to think of that. “For safety purposes, each Hizai has their own codename, and their own set of command words to substitute ponies and places.”

“What...”

“For example.” He looked annoyed. More annoyed. “If the channel indicate that, 'The Star-Mare must head to D-tank' you would check your pipbuck and see that D-tank stands for Dise. However another ponies command word for Dise may be, 'Leftish'. That way if one of my agents gets caught they won't be able to give out the code to deciphering all of my messages. Only the ones directed at them.” I nodded. That seemed, quite smart. Actually. “I would suggest reading up on the command words in your free time. The list covers most ponies, places, and requests I could ask of you. I have prepared for every opportunity.”

“I... thank you.”

“As well you should. I have given Stakes provisions for the trip, along with ammunition and...” He turned to look at Flare. “Grenades. Please try not to die. It would be a waste of resources.” I'll try. “If there isn't anything else, I have reports.”

“Yes... you are from before the war right?” I asked. That was a stupid question so he simply raised a non-existent eyebrow at me. “Right.” There was something I was actually curious about. A name that seemed to pop up a lot. “What do you know about Wallkirk?”

He laughed. Actually laughed. I was not expecting that.

“Wallkirk? A damn fool of a pony.” He adjusted his hat slightly before continuing. “He was the son of some wealthy pony. He was in the army for a few years, but when his Father kicked the bucket and left his riches, he moved to Caledonia and declared himself a war hero. Mind you, this was back when the Minotaurs had just started raiding the outskirts of the land, and the ponies of Caledonia were excited at his fame and set him up as mayor of some no-name town. Well, with his riches and backing from the Ministry Of Morale, he built 'Celestia's Paradise' as we see it today. Even put his damn statue in the

centre of town.” Wait, that was of him? I must have walked past that statue at least a dozen times and didn't even realize. “He hated competition though, and he hated when I started here. He bribed some of my best technicians to quit their jobs with me and go work for something called 'Project Steelpony'.” he scoffed at the name.

“I take it you didn't like him?” I asked.

“No.” Was the simple reply. “He was an idiot. He put his hooves in every pot. He bought the unfinished Stables from Stable Tec when the controversy came up that Caledonian stables had lower capacity than Equestrian. He took money from the Caledonian military and Stable Tec and used it to build a stupidly large military research centre in the middle of a Celestia damned mountain. Even I don't know what went on there, but I know whatever it was pissed off the Equestrian upper brass. Around the same time the bombs started falling, the MoM launched a raid on 'The Clips And Clops', where Kirk worked. If the world hadn't ended, it would have been a deathblow to Caledonian independence. In the end, he was a fool. All his plans were half-finished and half-assed. His top advisers stole from him and spied on him.” Which would explain how House knew so much. “Given a few more months, he would have been betrayed and replaced... but time was on his side. So he got to die rich,”

“What happened to him?” So that was the great mystery of Wallkirk. He was some business pony before the war, tried to juggle too much, and was almost killed for it. I wasn't sure why I cared, but it seemed important somehow. For good or ill, the city existed because of him, or at least because of his bits.

The ghoul shrugged. “Bombs fell. Everypony dies. Anymore stupid questions?”

“No...”

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We left the BS not long after that. I had the distinct feeling I had forgot to ask something, but I couldn't remember.

Either way, we started walking down the main street of Dise, and I paused to stare at the pony statue in the centre of the city. I had seen it many times before, but this was the first time I really looked at it. The stone looked weathered and faded, covered with nicks and scratches. The right forehoof that I suspected was supposed to be raised in the air was missing to the ages, while his face was so beaten it was a blank slate. This was Wallkirk. I had hoped that maybe if I knew about him, I'd be able to find out why the city was so fractured. But he'd died two hundred years ago. Useless.

“Hired.” Huh? I turned to see Flare staring at me. “You're doing that 'stare into space' thing again.” Oh. Right. I tore my eyes away from the broken statue and kept walking down the main street. “Hired... Hiiired.”

“What.”

“You okay? You've been actin' funny.” I looked to my right to see him smiling at me... but instead of focusing on him I looked at the three large buildings of the Ale House rising into the sky behind him.

“Molly has been silent.” He gave me a 'what' look. “She sent assassins after me... yet here I am. Meters from her front step. And nothing. Not a word. Shouldn't she be... killing me?” Flare shrugged as I continued. “I guess she gave up...”

“Not Likely.” High Stakes scoffed behind me. “Molly doesn't forget, and she certainly doesn't forgive. You don't stay a gang leader in this city by forgiving, and certainly not when you have the pressure she does. Many ponies resent her race, and look for any excuse to hate upon her. She needs to be harsh and swift to her enemies, to show them why they shouldn't be.” I cast a longing glance at the Ale House and

nodded. She was going to send somepony against me soon, and I had to be ready for her.

I angrily kicked a can down the road. Of course, Serenity followed the can and gave it a few more good kicks for me.

There was just so much more I needed to do in Dise. I had to talk to the Batmare, kill that damn Laughing Stallion, try to get out of that free job from Mayhem, deal with Molly, talk to Clean Cutt and the watchers about what was up with the starmetal in my body. It was frustrating that I had to live it again so quickly... and I really wanted to see Haze again. I never should have turned her down.

For lack of anything better to do I flicked on my pipbuck and started to hear it pounding in my ear. That was new. *"...Mayhem has claimed due to the damage to his water-plant water prices will have to be risen for the second time. When questioned about how two crazy costumed ponies even managed to get into his highly secure facility he declined to comment. Well how about that folks, ain't that just grand. If you see the Batmare give her a pat from me, and then tell her that if she wants to play superhero not to do it around vital city resources. Well, enough of that..."* Wait.

"That wasn't what happened!" I said out loud.

Serenity's can hit my metal leg and bounced off it as she came running over. "What didn't?"

"The... Haygas is claiming Batmare cost city resources. She... well, we saved the damn water plant." I growled. That wasn't fair. We worked hard doing something right for a change, and got blasted for it on the radio.

"That is common," the Batmare said. I jumped a little, and spun to see her standing beside me, a vague look of bemusement on her face. She clearly didn't teleport, or I would have noticed. Right? "I have foiled The Laughing Stallion so many times that the city has forgotten what happens when I don't."

"What happens if ya don't?" Serenity asked the obvious question.

"I --" The Batmare paused. "Well, I have always foiled that dastardly stallion. But it would be bad!"

"Why not... ignore him?" I said. She looked almost insulted. "Or. At least focus your effort on something else. Parasite mound. It has a lot of crime."

"Refugees from Equestria have been flooding the town as well, making the problem more prevalent," High Stakes added helpfully. I'm not being sarcastic. He was actually being helpful.

I continued, "Maybe help out there. If nothing else, The Finishers will be happy. It'll give you some friends. Or something." I shrugged. "Just. Saying."

The Batmare nodded. "We shall take that into consideration. Oh, Sidekick. We just came here to wish you a safe journey. May you bring justice to those who need it most."

She flashed away, this time my shoulder burning. Well that was something at least. She could have stayed longer to chat though... Hopefully she would listen. I don't know why I cared. It just figured that Parasite Mound was always such a shitty place, it'd be nice if they had somepony to help clean it up.

I felt Serenity jump onto my back, breaking my trance. I turned my neck to smile at her. "You know. Unlike me you have all four legs."

"Yeah," she admitted, lying on my back, "buuuut, yours are so much bigger. Mine are tiny and get worn out. An' I'm lazy." That was a terrible excuse, I knew for a fact she had a lot of energy. She proved it by immediately digging into my bag to pull out her makeshift leg, then she started to tinker with it. Most lazy ponies didn't try to build complicated pieces of magical cybernetics. But what did I know?

So I kept walking.

We stopped at the giant gate of Dise and had to wait as it slowly opened. Serenity and Flare had started discussing something about the difference between Enclave and Steel Rangers, and I didn't really care. When the doors finally opened, I noticed a section of the ground near the entrance was stained red. I remembered... back when I first came to Dise, a colt ran towards the gate and was killed. His body was taken away but the stain remained.

Something smelled like smoke.

“Hired.”

Yeah, definitely smoke.

“Hired!” I felt two little hooves slam into the back of my head knocking the smell away. “Hired.” Serenity sounded annoyed. “You were staring into space.”

“Oh...” I tore my eyes away from the spot of blood. “Sorry. Just. Been thinking.” Under my eye patch my new eye started to sting and itch. I almost wished I had stayed blind, it was annoying. “Too much.” I started walking through the main gate. The ponitrons on either sides turned with me as I watched, their large array of weaponry seemed to be targeted at me... however their ticks on my EFS stayed amber so I ignored them. Still didn't keep them from making my mane stand on end.

Parasite Mound seemed busier than I had ever seen it. Multitudes of ponies buzzed back and forth across the few streets not covered with rubble, and many of the broken down buildings seemed to have been somewhat repaired. I had lost track of how long it had been since I was here, but it was much more than I was expecting. Most of the ponies were dirty though, and way too many were laying on the street begging for caps. I indulged a few, but could not spare enough for all of them.

As I walked past the ‘Photo Finish Gallery Of Ze Magicks’ I saw the blue mare herself standing in front of the entrance talking with some heat to a pony in an NCA officer uniform. She paused for half a second to give me a polite nod and to adjust her glasses, before going back to arguing. I wasn't close enough to hear all the details, but it seemed to be important.

Seeing her reminded me how bright Celestia's sun was today. I paused for a minute to fetch my sunglasses. Sure, seeing everything in pink was strange, and they must have looked weird over my eye patch, but I loved them. Much cooler than High Stakes’ glasses even if they didn't shine nearly as much.

“Why are there so many?” I asked, as we started walking. I was sure one of my companions knew why these ponies were crowding Parasite Mound, and I was sure they'd tell me in the most patronizing way possible.

High Stakes, never missing a chance to be patronizing, answered first. “The Enclave war is still raging in Equestria, or so I have heard. Many ponies travelled south to escape, and were even past the border on the day of Sunshine and Rainbows. Having no homes left, I assume they kept walking. Dise is not too far from the border, and famous, so they tried to come here. When they were denied entry they must have just stayed here. The pressure has been building on The Finishers for some time, and they have been forced to kick some out.”

“Really.” That didn't sound much like the Photo Finish I knew, but when I turned back to look at her arguing I guess it wasn't that surprising. She couldn't have had the resources to handle so many ponies, and the pressure on her to do so must have been intense. “Where did they go?”

“Some ruins.” High Stakes Said, “They are calling themselves Eastside. The NCA is worried they will turn raider. It would be the first time ponies in the Dise outskirts threatened the city by turning raider.”

I was about to come back with a really witty reply when I noticed a commotion behind High Stakes.

Blue clad NCA soldiers had surrounded a store labelled 'Deadheads Gun Emporium' and were dragging an old ragged stallion out of the store. The old buck was flailing and screaming about deals and treachery but quickly shut up when one of the soldiers put a hoof in his face.

Against my better judgement I trotted over to the scene. "What is going on here?" I asked as I felt Serenity jump off my back.

One of the ponies scoffed at me from under his helmet. "Nothing to see here ma'am." I looked down to see a beaten old pony bleeding from his mouth. "Move along." This was not fitting into my fixing Dise plan so I moved no wheres and lowered my glasses so i could glare at him on a more personal level. "Uh..."

"What is going on here?"

The buck I was speaking too didn't feel like answering me, but a large mare with a plum mane did. And while hoisting the prisoner pony on her back no less. I was impressed. "Deadhead here has been selling illegal passports to travellers, ma'am." He turned to give the pony the dirtiest look. At the same time I felt the telltale sign of Serenity's silence spell in my shoulder. So I smiled and kept listening so Serenity could do whatever it was she was doing. "We have been instructed to take him into custody. I am sorry about Cpl. Steady Hoof, he's a new transfer from Hoof Town, and doesn't yet know the way it works here." She turned her rather fierce glare to the Cpl.

"How it works?" I paused, and still felt Serenity's magic, so I decided to keep her talking. "What is your name?"

"Major Willow, ma'am." She stood straight at attention. "You are an agent for Th-" She corrected herself. "Mr. House." I smiled at her just a little and nodded. Though I was more curious if she just assumed I was an Agent due to my leg, or if the NCA actually put out memos about all the new House agents. Also it opened up the possibility that House and the NCA worked closely together. I wasn't sure if I liked that.

"What proof do you have of Deadhead's involvement?" I asked in my most professional sounding voice as High Stakes and Flare stood to either side of me, looking threatening. Well, Flare was probably making funny faces, but he was on my blind side so I couldn't chastise him for it. Not that it mattered. I really didn't care about the stupid pony. It was his fault I couldn't get a passport into Dise the first time I tried.

"Direct order from Major Lucky." There was an old name.

"Excuse me." High Stakes said, "But didn't you just say you were also a Major? Where is it in the NCA playbook that you must take orders from ponies of the same rank."

Willow looked flustered for half a second as she repositioned the prisoner on her back. "Major Lucky is... different. He choose to keep the rank he had before the war, but acts outside of the chain of command. He takes the positions he feels like, and his word is considered equal to that of a Generals. Opposing an order from Lucky would be..." She grimaced and looked down the street. "Suicide. Political and career." She shifted the prisoner again. At the same time I felt Serenity's magic fade, and felt a weight on my back. "If it's all the same ma'am I need to get going. The rest of my guards are staying here to make sure the store is not looted."

I nodded letting her go ahead and followed her down the street after a spell. Not stopping until we were far enough away the guards around Deadheads old shop that they couldn't hear.

"Serenity what wa-" I turned around to try and ask what that was all about. And then I saw it. Cradled

in Serenity's hooves was a sleek black shotgun with pink trimming. The same one she tried to steal way back when. "Really, Serenity? Really?"

"Really what?" Flare asked, sounding genuinely confused. "That's a nice gun. Why are you being so 'serious?'"

"She knows," I said simply. Serenity just smiled meekly. "You already have a gun. You don't need two."

"But Mo-" I cut her off.

"No buts. You don't need two and... look at it!" it was nearly as big as she was, for Celestia's sake. "Maybe when you're bigger." She started to pout. "Oh stop that. Put it in my bag." She did slowly, pouting more. "You have a better gun. Why would you need this one?"

"It's pink." I facehoofed at her answer. I did that a lot. It couldn't have been good for my brain. "Fine, you can have it. Matches your mane, but I want it when I'm older!"

"You're silly." She stuck her tongue out at me. "So silly." I said as I started to walk to the exit of Parasite Mound. We had a job to do.

We did eventually manage to leave the city and get on our way, and without randomly running into a single other pony I had met earlier. For a bit there, I thought I had suddenly become magnetic to ponies I'd met before. When I left the city though, I did notice the robotic gun vendor I had bought supplies from before. Pasted on the top was the acronym, 'NCAAD'. New Caledonia Armoury Distribution. I had to wonder if that played a factor in Deadhead being taken down.

In the end, we walked for the rest of the day northward, towards the town where I began. I wonder if there is something symbolic about that? I guess we'll find out! Of course that was not the topic of discussion, as nopony (except Haze) knew enough about me to know the circumstances of how I got into the Dise wasteland.

Instead, the time was mostly spent with Flare recounting the story of how his little breakaway group broke away from the Enclave. According to him, it happened during a war with the griffins (which I did not know existed). It seems the remnants were so disgusted by The Enclave's brutality that when they were ordered to fire on chicks, they refused. This brought the hammer of The Enclave down on them and they were forced to escape to their home Thunderhead (not sure what that is) in an attempt to start an uprising. They failed and were forced to retreat below the cloud layer with little but their armour and a few Vertibucks.

The story was actually interesting. At least the way Flare told it.

Eventually though stories got old, and ponies got tired so we were forced to stop for the night. I had hoped to stop in Timber, but it was not to be. We found an abandoned shack, (Little Tyke's Flying School For Pegasi Who Can't Fly Good) and set up camp in there. Since it was missing most of a wall and the roof, we were forced to use some of the wood to make a small campfire (Flare assured me it wouldn't burn down the shack). We drew straws to see who'd get what watch, and wouldn't you know it, I got mid watch, meaning my sleep would be cut in half and end up insufficient. Which is exactly what you want.

So I laid down beside Serenity and tried to get a good nights sleep. Tried. It's the key word in that sentence.

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My dreams were filled with smoke and fire. I was running through a burning red hallway filled with thick black smoke. Somepony. I was looking for somepony, but I wasn't sure who. I gave a wordless

cry and coughed out thick black smoke. I had to keep going though. There was a pony that needed me. That needed my help.

To my right there was a flaming door. On it was the word 'Foundation'. My eyes went wide and I turned to run down the hall. Flaming doors with names flashed by me. I didn't look, but I could reach each name. Wildfire. Mischief. Lye. The names of my failures streamed past until they were a blur.

At the end of the hall there was only one door. This one wasn't on fire, thank Celestia. The name. It said Serenity.

I bucked it open with a crack. When I looked inside Serenity was nowhere to be found. Instead I saw a small colt whose mane was made of fire, and whose tears were made of blood.

“Why did you kill me?”

I woke up with a groan and the sense that my subconscious had gone from moody to melodramatic. It didn't help that I could still smell smoke. I opened my eyes, and was treated with a face full of fire.

“Shit!” I scrambled back and moved to cover my face. Only... it was just the campfire. Nothing else. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes to calm myself.

“Interesting reaction to fire, Hired.” My eyes snapped open to see Flare smirking across the campfire at me. “Don't scream so loud though, the others are resting.” Serenity was curled in a ball not a meter away, and High Stakes was sprawled out, taking up as much room as equinely possible. “When I was flying to Karkhoof, we could smell the smoke from kilometres away. It was... unpleasant. The smoke and fire, that is. Things like that have a tendency to bring back unwanted memories, ya know?” Did I ever. With a groan I rested into a sitting position and nodded. “Listen. Can I ask what happened there? High Stakes seemed to hit close but... nopony is really sure 'cept you and Serenity, and you aren't talking.”

“I...” My voice cracked. “There was a colt... I was supposed to start a stupid fucking war. I was aiming for a mare but I...” I couldn't tell him Serenity altered my shot, “I hit a colt.” Flare winced and looked away as the fire flickered between us. “With my fire bullet. Post Haste.” I laughed bitterly and covered my good eye with my hoof. “Then the pony that hired me tried to kill me.”

“Instant karma.” Flare copied my laugh. “Yeah, if only it was that simple.”

“Yeah.” I slowly put my hoof back down on the cracked stone floor. “How did you deal with it after... what happened to you?” At Bitter Steel or something. When he accidentally bombed all those foals, it couldn't have been easy.

“Lots of drugs, moping, and bad jokes.” Flare gave me a strained smile. “That... won't be an option for you. Drugs are bad, and you should feel bad, and you suck at jokes.” I did not! It's just that my jokes were usually unintentional. “Moping though. I think you've mastered it.”

“It took years of practice.”

“Oh, I'm sure. Standing in front of a mirror each morning, practising grimaces. But you never turned back, you kept going, no matter how hard being a downer was.” He mockingly clapped his hooves. “We honour your sacrifice. Really!” I gave him a slight smile. “Really though, not sure if I can help you. Murdering a foal, it's... well that's not something you let go.” You don't say. “Because it's an evil thing, whether you meant to or not, and it taints you. You want to do better, but how can you? How can you do better when you've fallen so far. Some ponies give up at that point and go raider. They can't do worse, so why do better? Other ponies focus their self hate into making the world better. Into trying and fixing the fucked up world. Some just drown themselves in guilt and drugs and alcohol... But if you want to forget about what happened, let it go and move on? You can't. It's one of those things.”

“Great.” I think he underestimated how much I could repress. Not that it was a healthy thing to do, if my dreams were any indication. “Thanks... I guess.”

“Sorry, Hired,” he said, as I looked up through the missing roof into the sky. It was a clear night, not a cloud that I could see, and every star was shining bright. I could see why Luna wanted ponies to see this. “Not much I can say. It's... they say time heals all wounds, but it doesn't fix scars. It's hard for you, so soon, but in time it gets easier living with yourself. Even if it never goes away.” He laughed. “There was supposed to be a joke in there, forget where. Damn, your mopiness is catching.”

“I do that.” I grabbed piece of rotten wood and threw it onto the fire. “A lot... sorry.”

He laughed and flapped into the air some. “You're saying sorry to me? Hah, ridiculous. After what I did?” I raised an eyebrow. “That whole 'spying' on you thing, or did you forget. Of course you didn't! How could you...” He looked solemn. “I didn't want to, you know.”

“Liar.” I stared into the dancing orange flames. It was hard, I kept seeing a colt running through them. “If you didn't want to, you wouldn't have.”

He snorted and scratched the back of his multicoloured mane with his hoof. “Yes, well... what I mean is that I didn't want to later. When they asked, I had known you for, what? Three days? In that time you nearly killed me twice, and got drunk with me once. Not the best records, so when it was requested I agreed. It was after I started to know you that... that I didn't want to. After you ran to save me, even when you knew your filly was in trouble. In the tunnels, do you remember?”

“Yeah... you got mobbed by ghouls.”

“Fucking ghouls.” He seemed to stretch his wings out at that, as if remembering the old injury he got there. “I'm a shit melee fighter, they would have eaten me alive if you hadn't showed up. I think Serenity is better at close range combat than me.” As if she could hear her name in her sleep, the small pony started to mumble something. I think I heard the word 'sugar' in there.

Schooching over, I put a hoof on her head, and stroked her mane. “I remember.” Visions of Wildfire flashed through my head. I remembered all too well.

“Spying on some asshole you barely know is easy... after seeing the lengths you'd go to, to save Serenity... and me. Well. It changed things. I was going to tell you on the boat but I got... summoned to Sky Fall. Then it was too late.” He shook out his mane and stared up at the starry sky. “Sorry. Shit got out of hand, but I shouldn't have...”

I looked up from Serenity to smile at him. “Laughing at me when I confronted you was also not bright.” He laughed quietly and nodded. When he landed in front of High Stakes he leaned over to see if he was awake. “It's fine. Just... don't do it again,” I said.

“I'll try my hardest. Don't need much incentive to avoid your wrath.” He smiled over at Subtlety. “It was a stupid decision... but honestly I'm not sure it was the wrong one. I like you Hired, but compare to my family? I don't know.”

“Don't worry about it. I'll kill you later,” I said, giving Flare my sternest look.

“Don't.” He winced back. “Stop looking at me like that! Damn, your poker face is deadly.” I moved to make a reply but he cut me off, “I know I know, 'And so are you.' Very classy come back. I know you aren't going to touch me 'less I try to touch you. Hell, unlike that one,” he nodded his head to High Stakes, “you wouldn't even kill me for caps. You'd say you would, but chicken out.”

“No comment.”

“You're too hard on him.” He smiled at the green pony. “He tries, but he's had a hard life. Did you

know that he was a slave once?" Wait, really? "It's true. Mother sold him when he was barely a colt. He had to win his freedom in some sort of fighting games or something..." That'd explain why he always seemed so calm and efficient whenever he fought. Kind of creepy. "That lever-action rifle he carries was the weapon he used to win his freedom."

"I... didn't know. I mean. I wouldn't have guessed." I took a good long look at the tall stallion. "He talks so proper."

"He claims he forced himself to, so ponies wouldn't suspect." I chuckled a bit. "I guess it worked. After that he worked for whoever paid him. He's rough around the edges, and believes in caps and all that, but... he's trying. I mean, he's rough around the edges but I think I... we... can smooth it out. In time."

"Before he shoots us in the ass for fifty caps and a new hat?" I grinned.

"Before he shoots you. Nopony wants me dead... not counting the metal hat brigade. They don't count."

"Don't count?" I layed down on the ground. "They have the biggest guns. They count twice."

"You're insane." I shrugged. I was okay with that. "And I'm following you. Does that make me more insane? It's a great mystery of our time. Oh!" He checked his wrist... "Look at the time. I should sleep, it's your watch now. Enjoy looking at... rocks." he paused. "Is that what your cutie mark means?"

"Yes, Flare, my cutie mark mea-" I stopped. I heard. Something. "Shhh."

I waved him down. It was my guard duty time anyway, so I might as well do my job. I inched closer to the far window. The muffled sounds seemed to get louder, and I recognized them as voices. I was hoping we wouldn't run into any ponies. Which I guess should have been my first guess that I was going to. Things never worked out the way I wanted, except when they did, and even then they didn't.

That made sense right?

I peeked up through the empty window frame and saw a light coming down over a hill. Not just a light, it looked like half the sky was on fire, and illuminated by it were ponies running. As they got closer I heard them yell, and talk in hushed voices. As they got closer I turned and nodded at Flare who seemed to be trying to wake Stakes up. "Stay here." I said. He looked up and nodded.

I moved quickly over to the door and opened it into the dark night. The smell of smoke was still strong. I had thought it was the campfire, but I wasn't sure with the lights to the north. Something was burning, but what was up there that could cause such a blaze.

"Stop, stop!" One of the ponies running this way cried. I moved to meet them on the road as they skidded and slowed, but not before making sure Subtlety was tight on my back. "You!" A deep red mare said. "Don't go that way!"

"Why not?" I felt something in my gut tighten. Past the hill they ran down I could see so much light.

"It's..." In the dim light I could see tears in the mare's eyes. "Timber! Timber is on fire!" The mare started to sob and ran past, the three others in soot-stained barding followed.

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We didn't go to Timber right away. That's because it was still hours off, and we'd never get there fast enough to save anypony. Instead we rested the rest of the night and headed off first thing in the morning. I did tell High Stakes about it when it was time to change shifts, and he didn't even really seem to care. Maybe he had never been there before, but it was bothering me all night so I could barely sleep.

In the morning I had to tell Serenity that 'something' happened to Timber, and that it was not going to

be pretty. She was understandably a bit upset at that, given how long we stayed there last time. It was... frustrating. I could do nothing but pray. I hated being helpless, so we left as soon as possible.

It was a long, quiet trek. With each step we could smell the smoke more and more. I hated smoke.

Eventually we got to a small hill about a mile away, overlooking the town. What was once the town. Maybe a tenth of the buildings were still standing (barely), and the rest blackened husks. Squinting a bit, I could see a few bulky figures in heavy armour walking down the main street, and past the town towards the huge mountain that overshadowed the city I could see more figures moving. They were moving towards the mountain... not... towards the 'Reconstruction Center'. What the hell happened here?

"I have a bad feeling about this." I said crouching low on my perch on the hill.

Something slammed into the back of my head making my eye sting. "Dumbass," Flare said harshly. "Never say that! Might as well say 'what's the worst that could happen?' or, 'don't worry, it's safe.'" I what? "Saying shit like that means bad stuff will happen. You've doomed us all."

"Flare." I gave him my best glare. "This is serious."

"I *am* being serious! Do you have any idea what you've done?" He was flailing his forelegs very dramatically, at least until High Stakes kicked him in the side. "Okay, maybe I'm being a little over dramatic, but just to be safe, don't do that again!"

"Should we go look for..." Serenity gulped. "Survivors?" Yes. Great thinking.

"Why?" High Stakes looked down at the hell that was once Timber without an emotion on his face. "We were instructed to go make sure that Bridle Hope is safe from some roaming raider gang. We have no reason to rush to the rescue of every poor town that didn't think to protect themselves." He flipped his straight hair out of his eye just in time for his glasses to flash. "Besides, do you have any idea who took the town out?"

I had an idea.

High Stakes kept talking though. "Do you have any idea what's in that mountain?" A lot of pre-war tech that was supposed to be used to help re-build the world. "Do you know why it hasn't been used?" Because the bottom level was protected by magical shields, and the top levels guarded by robots. Except for the very top which was once used by the Enclave. What? Sometimes I paid attention. "Do you know which group would have a great interest in that much pre-war tech?"

"Steel Rangers." Flare said.

"Exactly! We can't barge into newfound Steel Ranger territory an-"

"Steel Rangers!" Flare flew into the sky and I snapped my head away from Captain Obvious to see two Steel Rangers approaching our hill with surprising speed. "Fuckity fuck, I hoped they'd leave us alone."

"They're not after us, Flare." I said slowly. "They want the tech in there." Not just tech though, so much more. Dammit. Why would they hurt so many just for a few cool guns? "We'll take these two out an-"

WHOOSH

Rocket launcher, rocket launcher! I grabbed Serenity and dived backwards from where we were. The explosion hit like a minotaur and made my ears ring sending bits of dirt and muck into the air only to shower over us. I looked down to see Serenity, alive and mostly unhurt. Though she looked to be whimpering as she held her ears. I guess she couldn't get her spell up quick enough.

"Is everypony okay?" I said, barely able to hear my voice over the ringing. High Stakes was standing a

bit away, and I could see his mouth moving. Dammit, those things were loud.

I shook my head and was vaguely able to hear him say. "Fine." He wiped dirt off his glasses with a rag. "We need to leave."

"Yeah, once those fuckers die." I spat out dirt and helped Serenity to her hooves.

"You got lucky once fighting steel rangers! This time they mean business, you can't wi-" He was cut off by another rocket whooshing into the air. "FLARE!" He turned to the sky, his eyes wide.

Flare was looking down as the rocket screamed towards him. He twitched. It got closer. Flare, watch it! Do something! Move!

The Rocket exploded.

No. Dammit, Flare, why didn't you move? You aren't allowed to explode! Flare had to be safe, no way he got hit. Flare...

"DID YOU SEE THAT!" I spun quickly to see Flare grinning wildly with bunker buster on his back. "He tried to shoot a rocket at me, and I detonated it with a shell of mine! One in a million shot, and who could do it but me!" He kissed one of the barrels of his grenade launcher. "She never lets me down." he smirked. "You okay, Hired? You look... worried."

"I hate you," I said, and Serenity giggled. This was not the time to be giggling! "What are we going to do?"

"Fight, die, or run," answered Flare, so very unhelpfully. Thanks.

I turned away and moved towards the crest of the hill. "Watch my back!" I ran over the side to see the two steel rangers climbing up the hill. I quickly scoped Subtlety and used my stop timey mode. They can't beat me if i can stop time! Thank you, Stable-Tec.

Fuck you, Stable-Tec. It said I only had a five something chance to hit! I knew nothing about math but I knew that was less a chance than if I aimed normally. So I reluctantly turned the spell off and tried to aim Subtlety. A bullet fired and slammed through the helmet of one of the steel rangers. The beast didn't even fall over, just stop in his tracks as his armour kept him standing.

I didn't shoot though. It came from the town.

The second ranger looked away towards the town in shock. That time it was me who ended him. I got lucky, those explosives nearly fucked us up.

"Lets go, now." I tossed Serenity onto my back and made a beeline to the town. Flare and High Stakes followed, I assume because they realized I was stupid and going to do whatever I wanted anyway. That's just how I worked.

We reached the first row of buildings eventually, and I quickly slid behind its charred facade. Flare and High Stakes followed me, which I was thankful for. I had almost expected High Stakes just watch from afar. Flare said we could rough out his edges, but I doubted that. I guess, partially, because I'd have to smooth out my edges first.

I looked at Serenity beside me and nodded to her. Just like that, we were covered in a soundproof pink glow. She was getting much better at that. After smiling proudly at my little magician I slowly moved around the edge of the building, and peeked my head out into main street. There, I saw nothing but a few charred bones, rubble, and what looked to be the remains of a water trough.

I motioned for Serenity to put down the barrier. When it faded I said, "Coast is-"

BANG

“Fuck!” I dove back behind cover as the bullet missed by centimetres hitting the ground in a small puff of dirt. “Okay. Coast is not clear. There's a sniper in town. He doesn't like us.” I paused. “Or me. Probably me.” No pony liked me. Maybe it had something to do with my brutish behaviour or the way I tended to fuck up the lives of those around me. Or both.

“I have an idea.” All heads turned to High Stakes. “How about we head towards the crazy sniper trying to kill us.” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Great plan.” I grinned. He face hoofed and clearly misunderstood that I got his sarcasm and just didn't care. “The shot came from across the street.” I pointed to the mark left by the bullet. “From high up, further down. I checked. Probably the old inn.”

“As good as that information is, I fail to see how it helps. We can't get across the street, not with a sniper scope on us.” Oh High Stakes, why must you spend all day trying to make me hate you? Is it really that hard to be a little bit likeable? He kept talking. “How do you plan to get over there. It is not like we have one of Batmare's smoke bombs.” There was an idea. I really wanted a smoke bomb.

“I have a plan,” I said sternly, as I wrapped my hoof around High Stakes' neck. “It is...” I threw him out of cover into the street. “Run!” As he gasped and started running, I ripped off my eye patch. Suddenly, everypony had orange boxes around each other.

I dashed out and looked up at the second floor of the bar. Sure enough I saw a red box in the distance highlighting somepony. So I aimed there and let Subtlety roar. In the distance I saw splinters flake off the buildings and the red box vanished inside the building. They were still too far away for my EFS to work.

I really was getting the hang of this technology though.

“What the Hell!” High Stakes screamed at me, his glasses shinning. There was a thin trickle of blood flowing down his muzzle. “You could have got me killed!” I hadn't even thought of that...

“Stop being a wimp.” I rolled my eyes at him. “You're fine. A credit to the team.” I turned my head down the street. “We need to go... you know. Because of the sniper about to shoot... at us. With his rifle.” I blinked. “Seriously.”

Flare ran past carrying Serenity on his back. “Stop bickering!” he said as he flashed past... only to trip on the remains of a water trough. I had to wonder what that was doing in the middle of the street. Seemed like a terrible place for it. I mean, really. I still followed.

The run was quick. And brutal. The charred and ruined buildings to either side smelled like smoke and death. If I chanced a look, I could almost make out pony remains in the buildings. Fuck. I can't believe what happened here. It was such a good town. I was going to find Elder Chunky Soup and feed him hot lead for what he had done here. I don't care if he let us escape before, this was just fucking evil.

Evil. Yet, when I looked around at the town it wasn't Timber I was seeing. It was Karkhoof. I could hear the ponies screaming, and smell the new smoke. How could I call this evil, when I did the same thing? Fuck. I closed my eyes tight to hold back the tears, and then opened them again when I heard Serenity tell me to stop.

There. The town's inn/bar thingy. Up top was a sniper with the answers. “Let's do this,” I said.

I slammed into the door headlong, then, as if punishing for me for speaking in cliches, felt something slam into my side and send me flying to the side. Groaning, I opened my eyes and looked groggily around. There. Above me on the other side of the doorway was a shotgun. Rigged to a trip wire. Which I hit. Because I'm an idiot.

“Fuck!” I said. Serenity rushed over with a healing potion already ready. “No.” I grunted as I slowly

staggered myself to my hooves. “No...” I looked down at my barding. “Didn't pierce.” I winced as I shook off some of the buckshot from my barding. “Just. A med-x.” That's all I needed.

“Uh.” Serenity looked down. “If you say so; does your eye hurt, too? It can sometimes get bad post-op, an' if you're not feeling good...” I nodded. It didn't hurt that bad, but enough. A few seconds later Serenity injected the syringe into my back, and I could already feel the sweet relief. My side still stung, but not that bad.

“Thanks.” I smiled. “Much better.” She nodded nervously as I got to looking around the bar. What I saw didn't look good. All the tables had been pushed to the sides of the room except for a lone chair in the centre of the dirt floor. It was dyed red, and around it there was a huge stain that looks suspiciously like blood. Not good at all.

“What the hell happened here?” Flare asked. As if we'd know. “I can't even think of a good joke! It's a tragedy.” I shot a glare at Flare. “Too soon?” Dumbass.

I tore my eyes away from the bloody chair and moved towards the stairs. It was just too much. I knew the Steel Rangers were capable of brutality but this just seemed like too much to believe. I had to figure out what happened. I was too late to stop it, but I had to do something... right?

The stairs were exactly where they were before, which I suppose was a good thing. They seemed clean though, I half expected them to be slick with blood. Maybe I was just in a morbid mood. It was a tense walk up them, and I was sure everypony could feel it too. A sense that something was about to go wrong. That we wouldn't be able to do anything. I swear I could hear Serenity's heart beating in her chest.

The hallway was dark, almost black if it wasn't for my pipbuck light and slightly glowing green eye. In my EFS I could see a single red tick. Two doors down. I motioned for my companions to stay behind as we inched closer. There was no point using Serenity's magic. At this point whoever the sniper was he knew we were here. Which was not really a comforting thought at all.

We stopped at the door. My techno magic stuff said the pony was upstairs and I wasn't arguing. I licked my lips and stood point with Subtlety scoped and pointing towards the red tick in my vision. With a nod to Stakes, he reluctantly moved to buck open the door. Hopefully he could manage. With a few more nods of my head I was able to direct Serenity and Flare to either side of the door. I was getting better at this.

Okay. Deep breaths. Calming myself I nodded to the tall stallion. The door broke open with a crack.

I slipped into SATS. Chose the sniper's head and... stopped. In the compressed time state I saw my EFS change slowly from red to green. I turned it off for the second time without firing a shot.

“Grimer?” I asked. The scruffy light purple pony with bad teeth, and a badge for a cutie mark. The last time I saw him, I was making him the mayor of this Celestia-forsaken town. He was cowering in the corner, his hooves resting on a large sniper rifle that uses a push button, so that earth ponies can use it. “What the hell?”

“Hired...” He whimpered. “Hey.”

I walked in slowly, as the tense stallion seemed to be jumping at the sound of out hoof falls. He was the last pony I had expected to be in here. You'd think they'd kill him first. My companions followed along, and we took a long silent time getting settled across the room from him so he could still watch the window he was crouched beside.

Eventually it was Serenity who spoke. “Grimy!” The stallion winced at the noise. “What happened! Are you okay? It's so good seeing you again but what happened!?”

“You happened,” he said slowly, his eyes scanning the street. “Well... Hired happened. Funny. When I saw you two coming up, I thought you were the heroes I've been hearing on the radio. The mother daughter band fighting evil in the northeastern villages...” He shook his head. “Maybe you came to try and save us even though it was too late... you're not the heroes from the radio are you?” I shook my head. “No... It was a vain hope, after what you did here...”

“I... what?” I rubbed my forehead. “Last time I checked. I left the town with a new mayor and NCA fr--” I stopped and thought about what I was saying. I left the city NCA free, and what did I know about NCA and Steel Ranger relations? What did I know about the Steel Rangers in general? “When I forced the NCA to leave. Fuck. No way...”

“It was a matter of time.” He hefted his gun up and balanced it on the window sill. “The NCA kicked most of the fighters out. They became the raiders you helped kill in the Reconstruction Center. When you forced the NCA to leave, the town was virtually unprotected.” He looked up from his scope to give me a sad smile. “We should have seen them coming...”

I heard Flare flap his wings beside me. “You're telling me. They've been after that place for years, can't tell you why though. I mean it's like...” Flare looked a little... wary. As if he was expecting a Steel Ranger to jump out of the wall behind him and pin him down. “They won't get anywhere. I've been in the base at the top. Go down two levels and you reach a giant stable-like door. Unblastable. At the bottom, robots and worse patrol, and they aren't friendly. Not to mention...” His voice trailed off.

“Tell me,” Grimer said. His voice seemed strained. Well it always did, but worse now. “I want to know why my ponies died.”

“Hired, do you remember the tunnels?” Flare asked.

A voice whispered in my ear. *I never wanted this... for either of us.*

I nodded, and Flare continued. “Something like that. Sometimes you'd be walking down the hallway and see a face in the corner of your eye but nothing was there when you turned to look. When you slept sometimes your dreams would be vivid memories of the past... or the future you wanted most. Ponies used to call it haunted, but I wasn't sure.”

“Some sort of magical recurrence.” High Stakes gathered. “Why stay there if such things were happening? The Remnants had other options. Though I suppose in the end you did move your base.”

Flare looked around at all of us before sighing. “Listen.” He scratched the back of his head. “This is super classified shit right here, and I don't want it spreading.” He waited until we all agreed to not tell anyone before continuing. “For a while, the Remnants still had unofficial contacts with the Enclave at large, and we only moved our base to Dise when we got wind Operation Caulterize was going to go down. But the reason we stayed was...”

He paused and looked around before groaning loudly. “The reason we stayed was...” Another look. “General Steel Wing believed that there was a megaspell inside the facility.” Wait, what! A megaspell? Like the 'end the word' type megaspell. “The pony who built it was playing the Caledonian Military, and Stable-Tec, for funds, and rumours have been rampant that he abused the money on illicit experiments and megaspell production. If the Steel Rangers have that information, and got their hands on a fucking megaspell...”

“Then a lot of ponies will die.” I said simply. Fuck. I rubbed my forehead. Things just got a lot more complicated. “Why would Wallkirk make a megaspell there? It was supposed to be... rebuilding, right?”

Flare nodded but also shrugged. “Don't know. I'm not a history buff, but I do know Stable-Tec was

banned from Caledonia near the end of the war. Political bullshit. They needed an outside contractor to build their stuff, and Wallkirk was rich, right? So I mean. He used that money, and the Caledonian military money... I'm sure there is more in that mountain, but that's what I imagine the Steel Rangers are after."

"Without the NCA to stop them, they tore through the town..." Grimer said. "They brought ponies into the bar and tortured them. Saying they must know something. They killed so many." Tears welled up in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Hired. I was strong once. The NCA put a bullet in my brain a long time ago, and since then... I tried, I really did."

"I know, Grimer." I sighed. "I know." A fucking megaspell. A pony like Curly Fries getting his grimy hooves on a megaspell was just unthinkable. Apparently, the Steel Rangers didn't use their scavenged tech, but after the way the NCA had been pressuring them...

"Who cracked?" High Stakes asked the sensible question. Well, almost. The best question would of been, what did they tell them?

"The bartender," Grimer said after a moment's hesitation. "Doughy and talkative mare." He shook his head before scanning the street again. "She lasted an hour, but they broke her. It... it wasn't pretty. I saw it from the w-... I saw it." His voice sounded like barely repressed sadness and anger. "She told them what most ponies apparently knew. That the town was built by the survivors of Stable 123." I remembered that stable. Moreover, I remembered I still had that recording of Scootaloo that I'd downloaded.

I paused to turn off my ear bud, find the recording on my pipbuck, and play it for all to hear.

*"Hello! My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me (since I am pretty famous) for my awesome performances at events like last year's GALLoPS, or maybe just as the founder of Red Racer... Actually you might not. Never did get a foothold into Caledonia..."* it made sense she never got a foothold in Caledonia. By the time she recorded this her company was forced out for political reasons. I had to feel sorry for her.

*"It doesn't matter right now. You're the... lucky mare to find herself as the Overmare of Stable 123, and I can't say I envy you. You see we here at Stable-tec have... a philosophy. The world's turning to shit... I know. But we have to find a way to make it... better. And... fuck... you won't like what comes next."* They wouldn't like what came next. I remembered that stable well, and it ended in bloodshed.

*"You can't stay here. You need to leave. I am asking this of you... when the radiation goes down to liveable levels, leave. Go out and make the world a better place, fix this fucking mess we caused. You aren't Equestrians; you shouldn't get it bad... hopefully... hopefully you can leave in a year. Two. Every Stable was made with an idea in mind... find a way to fix the mistakes. When the other stables come out of hiding... I want there to be a world for them to live in."*

I had to agree with Scootaloo here. Her heart was in the right place, she was trying to fix things. She failed in the end, but she tried her best. I had to wonder how much it hurt her, to know the world was going to end, and not being able to do anything. That all her work would end up being for nothing. My mind went back to the Laughing Stallion's question, 'What is the nature of a hero' and I wondered if doing all you could in impossible circumstances was the nature of a hero.

*"Yeah...I chose a non-Equestrian stable for this reason. Only six stables were made outside of Equestria, and this task I made sure was in one of them. We fucked this world up. We can't fix it. Not yet. Not until we're ready, and maybe not even then. So when the times comes I am asking you... leave and rebuild the world."*

*"If you don't want to, then I'm sorry to say I'm not giving you a choice."* Was not giving them a choice the right thing, even if it was to help rebuild the world? I wasn't sure.

*"You may have already noticed the basement leaks. It will flood. You may have noticed the smell. The air filter will break down. You may be able to live for ten, twenty years. But eventually you'll have to leave, or everypony will die. Yeah... I'm a fucking monster. But somepony needs to fix this mess we caused, and fuck it, I'll make sure they do it whether they want to or not."*

*"Download the coordinates and passwords on the terminal. They'll lead you to help, a start. We have a second chance."* A start. In the end her start wasn't what she thought. Wallkirk gave the pretence of help with the lumber and supplies in the bottom level, but above that was anypony's guess. If anypony would ever be able to find out.

*"If it's any consolation, I'm sorry. I never wanted this... get out there and start rebuilding. Soon everypony else will join you. We'll have learned. I'll make them learn. So this will never happen again. May Celestia bless us all."*

Scootaloo's voice echoed through the room before fading into tense silence.

"That's the one," Grimer said. "It has the password?"

I paused, I wasn't sure. The recording I downloaded said it did, but I wasn't sure. So I said, "Probably. They might be going there now. Or sending a few ponies." I sighed. "I fucked up." Karkhoof, and now Timber. I suppose I should get a list of towns I wiped off the map by my actions. It'd put it beside the list of foals and innocents my incompetence and moral failings killed. I stomped my hoof so hard it cracked a floor board.

"Mommy..." Serenity said softly. "Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't, Serenity. But I will stop them."

"Really, Hired?" That would be High Stakes. I shot a glare at his smug face. "May I remind you that you have a job to do. Bridle Hope needs protection too. And House ordered you there. Once we are done with that, I'm sure he won't be against us trying to stop Steel Rangers from getting a super weapon... but not until we complete our job."

The small room was getting smaller, and more tense. The worst part was that he was right. I had a job to do. I was still Hired Gun, and a Hired Gun that doesn't shoot at what it's pointed at has no use.

"I'm sorry, Grimer..." I said slowly. "I'll help, but I need to go north. We'll be back."

"I won't be." He leaned part way out the window and fired a resounding shot. "They burned my town. I'm not leaving, and eventually they'll find and kill me." I tried to say something, but he cut me off with a near screeching voice. "They burned my town! I'm tired of running! Of being a coward!" He turned away from me, glaring out the window. "They let them go home. The ones that survived. Then they burned it. Entire families. I don't know why they didn't burn the bar, but they didn't. I could hear their screams but I was powerless. There is nothing worse then the sound of a pony burning." He grit his rotten teeth together. "I've ran my whole life. I ran from one side of the world to the other. When they came I-... Not now. They will come and I will kill as many as those fuckers as I have bullets."

"You could run. Make a new life. Start again." I tried to convince him. Eventually the Steel Rangers would find him cooped up in there, eventually he would die. Bloodily.

"No." He shook his head. "Not this time. I'm tired of running, of failing. This at least I can do right." He gave me such a sad smile. "Nice eye, Hired; it suits you."

“...Grimer.” I turned to Serenity. “Get him three healing potions, will that be enough?” Grimer nodded. “And some food. Whatever we can spare.” Serenity started digging through my bags and I turned to Flare. To see him already looking through his bags.

“I don't know this Grimer buck,” Flare pulled out a few mines, “but if he's going to risk his life killing Steel Assholes, then I'm willing to help. Celestia knows the wasteland needs less of them.” He slid the mines over. “Plant them by the door, if you want to go out with a bang.”

“Don't look at me,” High Stakes said quickly. “If he wishes to die, I am not going to assist him.”

“Ignore the asshole.” I rolled over the last two bottles of beer I got as a gift when I first got to The BS. “You won't want to die sober. It'd be a damn shame.” He lifted it up and put it beside the other supplies I gave him. I briefly thought about maybe giving him a med-x but decided against it. I didn't really have enough to spare.

“Um.” Serenity looked around. “Why can't... he just come with us? If the plan is to come back here, then we all win! Right?”

“Sorry kiddo.” The old stallion smiled. “I'm not running again.”

“You'll die though!” Serenity's voice sounded strained.

“Yeah.” He looked out the window. “Yeah. I've always wondered what it's like after you die. I'd like to go to Celestia's side. Be better than here. I should have died a long time ago.” He wanted to die. It was pretty clear. Something happened that he wasn't telling us about, something bad enough he felt the only way he could redeem himself was getting himself killed in a bloody rampage of revenge. My only thought was that maybe, when the Steel Rangers came, he had run away. Turned coward and fled, and came back when it was too late to save anybody.

“Can't be so bad.” Flare grinned. “There'll be a party, I'm sure. You like parties, right?” He gave a bit of an awkward laugh. “When you get there save some cake for us. I don't plan on dying anytime soon, but I'm sure heaven cake won't ever get stale.”

“I like cake,” Serenity said confidently.

“Sorry, Grimer.” I looked at the floor. “This is my fault. I... what I did here. I should have known. I tried to help this town. But I didn't know anything. I tried to help with a problem, and I didn't know all problems...” I looked at him and winced. “Sorry. I...”

“Oh get over it. Stop whining and do what you have to do. Yeah, you fucked up, I fucked up, everyone fucks up and sometimes ponies died. You didn't kill the town though.” Grimer spat.

“Just left it to be killed,” I said.

“I liked you more when you were an emotionless bitch.” I laughed when he said that. “Shit happens. Move on and do better, or die fixing it. Just don't run away like I did.” He looked out the window.

“They seem to all be up at their camp. If you want to leave, best do it quickly before they cut off the road.”

I got up, and we moved to the door. I turned back to see tears in Grimer's eyes.

“Goodbye,” I said. “Kill them all.”

---

Another town down. It seemed like everywhere I went, I managed to bring destruction along with me. I guess it was my fault. I had been so determined to be some sort of ruthless mercenary that I forgot to think about what I was doing. There were a thousand ways I could have gone in and out of Timber

without inadvertently causing it to be demolished. And at least a million ways I could have handled Karkhoof without causing a war. But thinking of an alternate solution would have been the smart thing to do, and you know me.

The escape from Timber was long and tense. Most of the Steel Rangers had left a while back, but not all of them. We had to crawl through the remains of Timber's houses in order to leave, and it was... unpleasant. I had Serenity close her eyes the whole way through. Bodies and skeletons seemed way too abundant, and all were charred black.

I tried not to think about it. One hoof ahead of the other. Keep going. Don't look back.

At the same time, I had to see some of the chaos I caused through my actions. I had to smell the burnt flesh and dwindling smoke. For the same reason I kept wearing the eye patch, I had to remember what I did and why I had to do better. Hopefully without moping so much. Flare was going to stab me if I kept moping.

We did make it out of town, and booked it down the road as fast as we could. It was still a few days' walk ahead of us. We had to travel around that huge mountain and head north a ways to reach Bridle Hope. If we moved fast, High Stakes said it would take two days walking. So we moved fast.

I was really itching to get there. If there was one thing I could kill without looking back and kicking myself, it was raiders. Apparently this gang mutilated an NCA envoy, so they had to be bad news, and if we got to Bridle Hope before them, we could teach them a lesson in pain. I even switched Subtlety's ammo to the fire ammo, and I hadn't used that since Post Haste. Foals shouldn't burn, but raiders sure as hell should.

"You seem excited," High Stakes noted as we trotted quickly down the old highway. The sun hung low in the sky, and it was going to be time to stop soon. We were nearly around the bloody mountain though, partly due to my excited walking.

"Yeah," I said squinting into the distance, "I guess you could say that." I looked up to see Flare lazily flying above us. He could've been to Bridle Hope and back five times by now. "Just. After seeing Timber. I need to kick something." I grit my teeth together. "Hopefully without it kicking me back later."

"Of course, I understand." I raised an eyebrow at him. "I do. Don't look at me like that. You are angry and you can't fix the thing you are angry about, so you wish to vent it on somepony who hopefully deserves it." I guess it was something like that. "You know, if you wished, we could have stayed at Timber and took on the Steel Rangers. You did not need to change your mind on account of me."

"What good would that do?" I spat and trotted faster. Serenity whined about the rocking motion from my back, but I ignored her. "I can't save Timber. Grimer wants to die. I fucked up. Bridle Hope, though. If we get there soon maybe..."

"Maybe you'll be a big damn hero, vanquish evil, and save the day before galloping off into the sunset?"

"Shove it, Stakes." I glowered at the road ahead of me.

"Then let me be serious. You may not find what you like there, and you may have to do things you don't like. Our job is not to wantonly kill everypony and save the day, we are there as a representative of House." I kicked a can I pretended was his head. "We are to negotiate a trade agreement to avoid fees for caravans on this road, and if they will not listen then we provide them with the fire you are so wishing to bring."

"Shut up." I glowered some more, because I could never get enough glowering.

"I am trying to help you." I shot him a confused look to see his face looked at most slightly annoyed at my insults. If that was his helping, I didn't want to see his hindering. "If you go there looking for a fight, then a fight you will get and nothing else. More ponies will die, and maybe they're raiders or slavers, or whatever you have a hate for at the moment, but each of those ponies you are running to kill have family. They have loved ones, they have hopes and dreams, and for every one that is irredeemable there are ten more that can change."

"How many raiders have you met, Stakes?" I asked him.

"Thousands. I used to work for Red Eye, and most of his so-called army was raiders or slavers. They're not all bad." He shook his head and paused to move his mane out of his eye. "I'm urging caution. We are here to make caps, not to go on a righteous crusade. You are not The Lightbringer and you are not Security. You are a mercenary who happens to work for a gang leader."

"What did you say the nature of a hero was?" I asked as we started a gradual turn in the road that led around, finally, to the northern side of the mountain.

"Stupidity." He smiled just a bit. "For every hero that fights evil and clears the skies of Equestria, a thousand more die un-mourned unloved, and too soon." There was a sense of sadness to his voice. "Just try to keep that in mind. Anything that happens there is not personal, it is just business. Okay? You seem to take everything so personally, but it's not about you. It's not about House, or raiders. Everything in the wasteland is about caps and survival."

*Survive.* "I know, High Stakes. Don't worry." I smirked at him. "Don't know why you care."

"I was the one who advised House to put you on his payroll. If you fuck up, that's on my shoulders." His glasses flashed at me. "Like I said, it's just business."

"Of course..." I could forgive Flare spying on me behind my back, because in the end he was right. I barely knew him when he did it, and afterwards he regretted it much. If anything, Flare shouldn't have cared what I thought at all.

But High Stakes was hard to stomach, because... maybe he reminded me of who I tried to be. Survive, gain caps, survive some more. For so long that was all I was doing. Hell, it was what I was still doing, but I was so bad at being heartless. Part of me still wanted to be that heartless mercenary, it would make life so much easier. But with each fuck up, it became harder to hold to that illusion. High Stakes didn't seem to care, though. Not if he got paid. Did I really want to be like that?

*Survive.*

"I won't let House down," I said finally. "If I have to, then I will gleefully take down all those fucking raiders, but the job comes first. It always does." I paused for a second. "I really want to shoot something."

"Knowing you, you'll be able to. I'm sure when we get there we'll be set upon by hundreds of raiders and assassins crying out for blood." He gave a mischievous smile.

"And monsters. The kind that turn invisible and shoot laser beams from their eyes," I added.

"A hellhound or two as well. Fifteen Steel Rangers." I looked up to see Flare grinning at us. "They've been following us." He flipped through the air to land on the other side of me. "Been keeping a way back. I don't know what they're doing, but they are following us. Might be they recognized me, though I had hoped that after their last botched attempt and seemingly new goal, they've forgotten. It was just some stupid-ass political thing anyway, to keep the detractors busy."

"Great." I groaned. "Just what we needed. Steel-clad stalkers. Did you notice any assassins too? I

figure Molly has been waiting a while. Might want to try again.”

“Can't say I have, though I wouldn't be surprised.” Flare smiled. “Have you pissed off any other deadly group we should know about? Because if you did, this would be the time to tell us.”

“No pony you'd know.”

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Despite being stalked, the rest of the walk was completely uneventful. We stopped that night in a small cave low on the mountain, and Flare set up his remaining mines at the entrance in case our stalkers got a little bit too nosy. Despite that, I actually had a full night's sleep without a single nightmare for the first time in a long time. I didn't wake up sweating, or cry out in my sleep or anything. This, of course, made me very suspicious.

I did not have much time to dwell on this. as we rushed out there as soon as Flare disarmed his mines.

The walk north was long, boring, and nothing interesting at all happened. Often, that seemed to be the way it went. If you weren't being attacked by radroaches or raiders, nothing interesting happened. Sure, we talked a bit, but most of that was between Flare, Serenity, and High Stakes and was hardly important. Such as the three hour discussion on which was the best flavour of snack cake (turns out it's carrot), an even longer argument on the best way to cook a radroach (Flare was heavily on the 'roasted' side but in the end stew won out).

Part of me really wished something interesting had happened from the time the sun came out and we left our cave, to when we reached the outskirts of Bridle Hope sometime near midnight, but... well, nothing. By the end of the walk we were all so tired of walking (and of each other) no pony spoke at all. It just doesn't make for an interesting narrative, sorry.

It was not a good sight coming into the starlit view of Bridle Hope. All around the town were large banners flying a symbol obscured by darkness, and crude tents were erected along the main street. We were too late. The raiders were already there.

“This is not good,” I whispered urgently to Flare, as we hid behind a rather large boulder. “Not good at all.”

“You're telling me.” He smirked. “So much for saving the town. The way House talked, I had hoped we'd be able to get here before them. Celestia knows we moved fast enough... for earth ponies anyway.” I kneed him in the chest. “Too soon?”

“Ass.” I smirked and peeked back over the rock towards main street. Most of the camp was too far away for my EFS but I picked up at least one red tick. I could vaguely see the outlines of ponies in the tent, illuminated by light inside. The largest number of ponies weren't by the tents, though, but gathering around the Bridle Hope general store. It seemed it got a new owner, this one certainly as vile as the last.

“See anythin'?” Serenity tugged on my barding to ask. Slipping back behind cover, I nodded... and then shook my head. I saw something, but what I saw wasn't really worth squat. I knew some raider clan was camping in the middle of town, but I didn't know who, and most importantly I didn't know where the townsfolk were. I only stayed here one night, but there was at least one pony I'd like to see safe.

Pearly. It had been so long since we had... whatever it was we had done when I first arrived. I still wasn't clear on the details of my drunken haze, but I had a few ideas. If she was still alive, I imagine we'd need to talk about that, and I'm sure Serenity would like to discuss with her a few things in regards to what happened to her. If nothing else, we could do that. I looked down at Serenity and remembered Haze's words. I had to make sure she was okay with all this. This town brought her no good memories,

I was sure.

“So, now what?” I asked my companions. Maybe they had a better idea how to proceed than me.

“We should go to the raiders as representatives of Mr. House,” High Stakes said simply. “It was what we came here to do, remember.”

“Well,” Flare said slowly, “I remember House saying something about an NCA envoy being mutilated. Now, last I checked, House is not more powerful than the NCA, so in all likelihood they'll treat us worse. Much worse.”

“If we could find the townsfolk,” I said, “we'd have a better chance of making our next move. Wanton murder, or whathaveyou.” This was not working out the way I wanted. Since we'd left Dise, we'd run across one destroyed town, and another now under raider control. I wanted to ask if things could get worse, but I am sure Flare would have stabbed me for jinxing our chances.

Serenity sighed. “Scootaborg would know what to do...” She paused as if listening to something. “She says you should give me that shot gun.”

“This is not the time, Serenity.” I growled. Think, Silver, think. I had to do something. Something smart. Something that wouldn't get me or any of my companions killed. Something that...

CLICK

It seemed I'd forgotten that my EFS only worked in the direction I was looking, and not behind me. Because it seemed that when I was busy trying to think of a solution to our problem, part of the problem snuck up on me and pointed a gun at my face. A stallion with a green mane and a pissy scowl, to be exact. It didn't help that he was standing on the boulder we were hiding behind, pointing his gun down at us.

“My my my, what do we have here?” There was a sadistic grin on his face that slowly faded to one of confusion. “You with the glowing eye. Do I know you?” He turned his scowl back on. “It doesn't matter, you're coming with me. I was told to bring any trespasser to see S-”

Serenity threw Scootaborg at his nose.

The raider drew back as it hit his nose, his eyes going crossed as if he wasn't sure what hit him. It was just long enough for me to stand on my back legs, grab his gun and toss him off his perch and onto the ground with a hard thud. Before he could move, my metal hoof was on his neck. “Would you like to know me?” I growled.

“Nice line, Hired!” Flare clapped his hooves together, “You're getting better.”

I shot him a glare as my temporary captive spoke. “Who the hell are you supposed to be?”

“Hired Gun. Representative of Mr. House.” I pressed my hoof down harder. “We are here. To make sure trade can pass. Through this town. For free.”

“Good luck.” He spat.

There was a long pause.

“Is that it?” I tilted my head at him. “Aren't you going to tell me who you're working for? Curse me? Explain why I'll fail? Do something... dramatic? That's what they usually do.”

“Are you an idiot?” Was that a trick question?

“She totally is,” Flare said ever so helpfully. “But she's an idiot with an iron hoof to your neck. So, under the circumstances, it'd be prudent to keep her satisfied. So scream a little. Beg for forgiveness.”

Something. You're such a boring captive." I wasn't sure if I should laugh or kick him. Maybe both.

"Captive?" He asked. I didn't like the way he was smirking. "We've been watching you for miles. Nice pipbuck. Do you know the problem with EFS? It only works in one direction." Wait. Oh shit. Oh fucking shit. "I'm not a captive, I'm a distraction."

"FUCK!" I turned as fast as I could to see two ponies with pipbucks behind me pointing rather large guns at my face. Fuckity... "Flare, how did you not notice?!"

"You have pipbucks, too. Bet you can tell how far away you need to be for EFS to not trigger." Flare grimaced, looking at one of the ponies legs. "I wasn't looking, didn't expect it." I heard the sound of breaking branches and turned to see even more ponies behind me. I wouldn't be able to get close to the bridle of Subtlety without being blown to bloody bits. Even worse, I could hear Serenity whimpering as she hid behind my legs.

"Take their weapons." My once-captive said as he scrambled to his hooves.

Why did everypony take my gun from me? I growled and glared at the ponies who came near, promising to destroy them at a date to be determined. Flare looked really aggravated at ponies taking his weapons, but High Stakes seemed resigned. I'm sure he was finding some way to blame me for this. Just because I got captured once or twice... At least they didn't check Serenity for weapons. I guess they figured a foal wouldn't be armed. And I still had that shotgun Serenity had stolen in my bag. I was surprised they didn't check. It was something, if we had to fight our way out, and knowing my luck...

"March," the stupid now-captor said. "Maybe our leader won't kill you."

We were forced to take a long, humiliating march around our rock cover and down the main street of Bridle Hope. In front of the camp were two flags planted on iron poles, but I didn't even look at them. I was too busy trying my hardest to think of a way out of this predicament. There had to be a way to fix this. I could do something... anything. Yet we kept walking down the street, and once again I was powerless. For all my vast strength I could never do anything.

We took another step into the camp. I really was useless wasn't I? Even when I tried to do good, like in Timber. I failed, and ponies burned. They burned when I was evil, and burned when I was good. Every action I took was just another failure upon failure. Serenity should have stayed with Haze; she shouldn't have been witness to all my failures.

Another step. I wondered who the leader of this raider gang was. If he or she knew anything about me though, they'd do the smart thing and kill me without a second thought. I've betrayed so many ponies now, it'd be foolish not to. I could only hope I was still anonymous enough to get away without being known. I was a failure, and couldn't even live up to my less than optimistic name.

Ponies were sticking their heads out of their tents as they watched us pass. Flare and High Stakes seemed to have their heads held high, but I kept mine low, staring at the ground. At the corners of my EFS, I could see so many red ticks I didn't even want to start counting them.

Another step closer to the store where I had killed Nanny Jane and rescued Serenity. It was my first job with House, and I'd failed already. Maybe... there was still the hope that their leader would negotiate with Mr. House. Maybe I could pull it off. No. Not me. I was not a smart pony, and it'd take a smart pony to talk themselves a deal from a position of weakness. I had failed, and now had to hope one of my friends would bail me out, again. Maybe I should have listened to High Stakes and marched up, demanding to speak to their leader. It'd look better on us than being dragged there.

Another step closer and I looked past the store and up at the casino and hospital on the hill overlooking the town. I could see lights shining from the windows... I wondered if that's where the townsfolk were.

It'd be a good defensive position. If these raiders attacked it they'd win, but take heavy losses. Pearly would know that. She had to be alive.

We stopped at the entrance to the store.

"I don't wanna go in there." Serenity whimpered. "I don't wanna, don't let them." My eyes watered a little bit as I looked down at the poor filly cringing away. I should have listened to Haze, but that would have been the smart thing to do. I should have asked her to keep Serenity in Dis. I should have asked her to kiss me.

"Serenity..." I whispered down at her. "Be strong. No pony will take you from me. Not while I live." I steeled my gaze for when she looked up at me. "Not here. If they try, I'll kill them all." I heard one of our guards jeer, but I shot her a look that would shatter bones before turning back to Serenity. "Nanny Jane is dead. You don't need to be afraid her. I won't leave you." She looked away. "Look at me, Serenity." She did, reluctantly, and her sad grey eyes were full of tears. "They won't hurt you."

She nodded.

"I love you, mamma..."

"Love you too, Serenity."

I wasn't sure if she meant it. I know that deep down, she was still mad at me for what I had done, and I deserved that anger. But now she was going to face a place I know she never wanted to, and she needed something to hold onto. A foundation she could build her emotions on to keep her strong. I could be that something.

We entered the General Store.

I am not sure where the goods all went, but they'd been cleared, leaving the entire room empty except for the lower counter that was being used as a table. On the other side of the table was an olive pony with a thick grey mane, smiling wanly at me. It made my stomach turn and twist into knots. A thousand horrid memories came to the forefront all at once. Wait...

No...

No. Fuck. No way! It couldn't be!

"I killed you!" I blurted at the raider leader.

"I thought the same of you," Smooth Tongue of the Crimson Hoof said, "Silver Storm."

Level Up!

You forgot to keep track of your stats! Idiot! New Milestones: Guns 75. Unarmed 50. Sneak 50.

((A/N: Sorry for the wait, but here we are again, and once again I would like to thank kkat for the wonderful world she created for me to defile. As well I'd like to thank my awesome editors who helped make this stupidly long chapter readable. Them being: theBSDude, Julep, and Errant Indy.))

## Chapter 17: Choices

*“If a pony resists you, you must feed them lead and fire. However, if they bend the knee, you must help them back up, else nopony will ever bend.”*

“Who the fuck is Silver Storm!?” Flare, as always, asked the best questions, even if he didn't truly understand why. Who was I? I certainly wasn't a loving mother, and I was a failure as a heartless mercenary. So who exactly was I, and why was I there? Somehow I failed at being both Hired Gun and Silver Storm. I guess that meant I needed a new name.

Smooth Tongue, that fucking bastard, seemed amused at Flare's outburst. “Why, the giant mare with the silver coat... Oh, has she not told you? I suppose that is to be expected. She was always good at running, weren't you, Silver?” I winced and avoided his eye contact. Dammit. What was he doing here? If it was any other pony but him...

“You know this freak, Hired?!” Flare seemed more than a bit shocked at the revelation. I nodded slowly. For his part, the bastard leaned across the counter grinning from ear to ear. “Yes, she used to work for me. Do you really know nothing at all about your travelling companion?”

“Fuck off, Smooth.” I looked back up at the olive buck and showed him my most defiant glare. “I never worked for you. Never.” I would never work for him. Fuck him. Just. Dammit.

“Oh?” He tapped his pipbuck on the table. Wait, when did he get one of those? “If I recall you often guarded over my land. Not to mention the thousands of times you scavenged through ruins on my behalf.” I flushed and looked away because he had the right of it. “And those times you fought for me, or did you forget?” No, I only tried to. How could I forget my home though? Loath as I was to admit it, anytime I worked for Marefort I worked for him.

“You...” Flare folded his wings to his back, and looked over to me in shock. “You were a raider?” Was I? I didn't do any raiding myself, and the only time I fought was in the defence of my home. On the other hoof, I worked directly for him and my work, my town's work, was vital in him keeping control over large swaths of land. Hell, the weapons that he had pointing at me were probably ones I had dug out myself.

“I...” There wasn't an easy answer. “No. Yes.” I stomped my metal leg. “Maybe.” He didn't seem impressed. “It's. My town. It was under his control. I never killed for him...” It was the closest thing to the truth I could think of. “I tried to kill him. I...”

“Failed.” Smooth Tongue failed. “Guards,” he looked at the group that had brought us, “thank you for bringing these ponies to my attention, but I have ample protection.” He nodded to the guards on either side of them. As our capture-ers left, he continued, “she nearly killed me though; you should pat her on the back.” High Stakes did. I think he was mocking me. “She broke my leg and left me limping, and I can't thank you enough for that. I was out for a week, and during that one of my lieutenants tried to seize control of Marefort.” I suddenly stood up much straighter. “Luckily most of the ponies were smarter than you, barricaded themselves inside the central building. A few still died, but not as many as could have.”

I gulped and looked at my feet. “Who died?”

“Star Belle, Whitewalker, Brightflame, Hedge, and Grey Wind.” I winced. More names to add to my list of failure. “You'll be happy to know your failure put my leadership into question. I needed a show

of force to remind ponies why it is I in charge. Extending my territory works and once these fool ponies surrender. I will establish one of my most trusted ponies as mayor and return to Stable 42. It is further than most of my towns, so I fully expect him to rebel, but by then my little show will be over, and it won't matter."

"You're wasting the lives of those under you, so you can prove a point?" High Stakes did not seem at all impressed, at least guessing from the haughty look he was giving Smooth.

"Of course." I really hated the way Smooth Tongue smiled. It just made my skin crawl. "It is the game those in charge must play. It is a show of power, of force, showing that I will do whatever I want. I am not physically strong, so I must show in some way why I am allowed to rule, and why others must follow. When they doubt that, I crush them."

"You get others to do the crushing," High Stakes said simply. "Others like me, or like Hired."

"Power is not just about the size of one's gun or how many ponies they kill. Oh yes, that can be important, but it is not everything." He waved his hoof. "I doubt you would understand the subtleties." I understood Subtlety all right, it was exactly what I needed to end him.

"You're mean," Serenity said scrunching her little face at him, "And... and you smell." Nice one. I smiled my approval down at her.

"Oh. I did not see the little one." He leaned almost exaggeratedly over the counter. "Tell me little one, what is your name?"

Serenity continued to give her best scowl before saying, "Serenity."

"A pretty name for a pretty filly." Coming out of his mouth that was way too creepy. "Silver, I am surprised you picked up another one," he said, as if it was as easy as buying a new gun, "considering what happened to your la-"

"Smooth Tongue If You Finish That Sentence All The Guards In The World Won't Protect You." There was no bluffing in my voice. His guards could riddle me full of holes but if he dared to bring up Foundation against me, I would tear him limb from limb, and if I died trying, I'd come back from the dead to finish the fucking job.

"Touchy as always. But more talkative, this can only be a plus the way I see it. So tell me... Hired, was it?" fuck him and his grin. "What have you been doing with yourself? So much has changed and I feel we haven't had the time to catch up."

I didn't respond.

"Really? Nothing at all. So many friends for so little done."

"You know," said Flare, "I am going to base a villain off you in my next story. You hit all the marks perfectly. Tell me, is it on purpose, or are you just like this naturally?" The raider leader laughed.

"A little of both, I am afraid. The type of ponies I deal with are better handled by treating them as if they are beneath you; if you lower yourself to their level, they think they can be you. It is fine if they hate me, so long as they fear and respect me." There was a slight chuckle in his voice. "If you wish, I can go further into the realm of villainhood so to have somepony to hate accurately. Let me see... I suppose I should start by insulting the tall pony's glasses and hairstyle. Straight over one eye? Are you a sullen teenager? Next I would mock you," he said, addressing Flare. "Perhaps mentioning how ineffectual and pathetic the Remnants are, and then pointing out you are not nearly as funny as you believe. Next would be mocking Silver for her new cybernetic equipment, making her question if she is truly pony or just a soulless machine, followed by an obvious insult towards her lack of intelligence." With a weary sigh he continued, "Finally I must, as all great villains do, threaten to harm the child if

my wishes are not met. Is that sufficient for your work?"

"Can you laugh maniacally, too? Place your hooves together and reference vague events that will only make sense in retrospect? I mean if you're going for the 'evil' thing you might as well go all the way." Flare said. To my eternal surprise Smooth Tongue laughed.

"Oh, I like you. How would you like a job?"

"How would you like a mine in your rectum?" Flare shot back. "You know, on a scale from one to ten." Smooth Tongue's jovial expression faded as a guard entered the room behind us.

"Sorry." A far too familiar voice said behind me. "Am I intruding?" The voice paused. "Silver? What the fuck are you doing here?" Wanting to kick my brother in the face... I hadn't seen Summer Silk or Meadow or whatever he was calling himself now, since stable 42 when he shot me. With poison. From space.

"Getting captured. Shocking I know." Flare answered for me. Once he gets going he just doesn't stop. "Who are you anyway, another of these raiders?"

"I am Summer Silk," he answered. "Of the Crimson Hoof. Silver Storm is my idiot sister. I apologize for whatever she did to bring you here." The silvery-grey stallion said as he slowly trotted around us giving me a wide berth before standing off to the side of Smooth Tongue.

"Uncle?" Serenity asked.

No one answered her. That could only be for the best.

"Meadow. I assume you are here to shoot me again?" I glared at my former brother. "Don't miss this time. You won't get another chance."

"T-that was..." He sounded abashed. "One time, and you attacked first."

"You shot me with poison! From space!"

"Are you two done bickering?" Smooth Tongue asked. That's exactly what we were doing. Just like old times. Only with poisoned bullets. From space! And Smooth kept talking because ponies loved to talk me to death. "Have you made any progress with the villagers, Summer?"

"Sorry, sir," my stupid ass brother said. "Anypony who gets halfway up that hill gets shot at. We could take it by storm but with impressive losses. On both sides. We've tried all sides of the hill, but they have plenty of snipers..."

Continuing his theme of being evil Smooth Tongue said, "As if they stood a chance. I applaud them their valour for defending their home, but it is pointless. We hold superior numbers and tactics. If I wished it I could sent a stealth squad into their casino, slaughter their snipers and raze the building to the ground without ever firing a shot." I doubted that, but I wished him the best. Except not. "I would like to avoid that however. A town without townsfolk is a graveyard, and I would prefer to have the town continue, only under my control." A slightly different tone than when Meadow wasn't around. Interesting.

"We'll talk to them," High Stakes said.

Wait, what? No we wouldn't! And most certainly not for that asshole. I had to work for him my entire life and I was not going back just as soon as I got free. No way.

"Hired, stop glaring at me." I wasn't glaring at High Stakes. I was trying to set him on fire. With my mind. "We were sent here to do a job." He turned his head back towards Smooth Tongue, and he didn't catch fire. Drat. "Hired here has been to the town before and may be recognized. Meaning we may be

able to negotiate a deal for their surrender... however we require payment. A promise that all caravans coming through this town will not be taxed.”

The leader rebutted, “Taxes are a good source of income, and the Crimson Hoof will require tribute by the town.” And in time they would use the town, steal it's males, and make a larger army. I am not entirely sure why males though, as females could fight just as well. Maybe each town's pony tribute was set up differently...

“Yes.” High Stakes admitted as his glasses flashed, “but caps can be gained in more than one way. The reason this town is a hub for caravans has to do with the casino. Take a percentage of their profits and open up trade routes with your towns in the north. You get more traders coming in and more money for your casino. Taxes will drive business away, but this way you'll get more, and thus more caps in the long term.”

The raider leader clapped mockingly. “Well now, I am impressed. If it works. But it's the brightest idea I have heard all day.”

“I'm still lost,” Flare said. “So.” He pointed a hoof at me. “You worked for him.” He pointed at Smooth. “Or lived in a town he owned. You're also his sister.” He pointed at Meadow. “And he actually works for him because he's an ass or something.” I nodded. “So then you.” He pointed his hoof at me. “Tried to kill him.” Why did he keep pointing at ponies. I didn't understand. “But was protected by your brother who shot you.”

“With poison. From space.” I added.

“Right, space poison, which explains why Sky Fall is so obsessive.... Where was I?” He furrowed his brow. “Fuck. I'm lost again. Whatever. You're all insane, and I hate you.”

“Thanks for the input. It has been noted and discarded.” His eyes gleamed at High Stakes. “How do you deal with these stupid ponies? It must be a task.”

High Stakes did not respond.

“Right.” Smooth Tongue continued. “But it is your job, and you do it so amiably. What was your name?” High Stakes moved to answer but was cut off. “It doesn't matter. Funny that. Now that we are done... catching up, I suppose I should put you to use.”

My lovely brother eyed me warily and gulped nervously. “If I may offer a suggestion... it seems you are plannin' to let her try and convince the townsfolk to surrender, but is that wise? She did try to kill you before, and doesn't seemed to have changed temperament.”

“Never let a tool go to waste, Summer. Silver Storm may be wild and unpredictable,” I hated it when ponies talked about me as if I wasn't even there, it was just rude, “but at the very worst it'll be one, maybe two more ponies we'll need to kill. A single pony can't change the tide of an unwinnable battle, no matter how strong. At best, we win without much of a fight at all. Besides.” His red eyes sparkled as they stared at me fully. I knew what he was thinking, he didn't even say it. There was no way he was taking Serenity from me!

I put my hoof down in front of Serenity and focused on the shotgun in my saddlebag. I wondered if I grabbed it, then switched to stop timey mode if I stood a chance. It was the only option as there was no way... I refused.

“Do you know why villains use less than savoury methods?” Smooth Tongue asked me. “Because they are effective. Please tie the filly up as insurance to Silver's good behaviour.” He smiled. “Be good, and not a hair in her mane will be hurt. Can't argue with that, now can you? Tell you what, I'll even let you take your pegasus friend with you to help with your negotiations. It's just business, right? Do this and I

can assure you that the town will allow caravans free travel.”

“Don't worry, Momma.” I looked down at the source of the small voice. She was shaking, but her face seemed confident as she said, “You'll come back for me. You can do it. I'll be fine, don't worry... I'll be.” I could do it. Yeah... I was not okay with this. There was no way I'd ever be okay with this. Not wither her, not here. But I had no choice.

“Heartwarming,” Smooth said. “Escort Silver and the pegasus as far as the hill, and leave the others here as collateral. Worst comes to worst, they are mistaken as Crimson Hoof and the defenders lose two bullets.”

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“So,” Flare said turning the 'o' into a long whistle, “you're Hired's brother.” As we walked through the silent camp toward the casino on the hill I resisted the urge to take out my shotgun and kill everything. Obviously it was Meadow who was chosen as our escort because, really, Smooth Tongue hated me and wanted it to be as awkward as possible. “What was she like as a filly?”

“Loud,” was the instant answer, “and hyperactive. She mistook our home for a jungle gym.”

There was a slight pause as Flare seemed to process that information. “Hired Gun... loud and hyper...” He looked intently at the dirt as we walked before turning his head back to Meadow. “Are you sure this is the right mare?”

“No.” That hurt. “She is different than the way she was. I heard she changed from the time I was taken away, but such a change is unsettling.” There was a sense of heavy sadness in his voice. “She was never bright, but she would smile before. Maybe she grew up or what happened hurt her more than I knew. I loved my sister.”

“I changed?” I growled. “You are working with raiders. I saw you kill peaceful folk.” For the brief second I pushed my own sins out of my mind. “You became something horrible. You are working with him! He killed our mother.”

“Do you remember our mother?!” I winced at his tone. “Do you even remember her name?” It was... Mayor Mare. Except that was just her title... and I always called her momma. I didn't know. I didn't know my own mother's name. “Maybe she treated you like a pretty princess, but she was a drunkard, and brutal with punishments. She resented her position, resented the Crimson Hoof, and resented me because she knew it was only a matter of time before they took me. She'd beat me when she drank too much, and tell me how worthless I was. How I'd never accomplish anything. Sure she'd dote upon you, but she was a horrible mare.” But. She was my mother! She wasn't bad. I didn't remember any of this. “It's just like you Silver. You were always good at forgetting the past when it was inconvenient. Smooth Tongue was more of a parent to me than our mother ever was, so don't talk to me about who he killed.”

We stopped at the edge of the hill where the casino was waiting. “You...” I was shocked. I... in my mind, Mom was never like that. She was nice and kind and... “You can't talk about her like that!”

“I'll talk to her however I like!” His eyes were furious and torch light from the camp set his body half in shadows. “You clearly never met the mare, just the mare you wanted her to be. Just go, Silver. I had hoped... hoped that if you survived you'd see your mistake. That you'd come back... I've missed you Silver. But you refuse to learn. So... just go. It was foolish of me. Just...”

There was a glint of tears in his eyes. I reached my hoof out but I wasn't sure why. Part of me wanted to embrace him. Strike him down. Something between but I couldn't. He was a monster and my brother, so I put my hoof back and stomped at the ground, turned to the casino and stormed away. It didn't matter. Well, it did matter! He was my brother. He would stand up to bullies for me when I was

awkward and afraid to say anything back. I didn't want to let him go... but I didn't know what to do. It had been so long.

I was halfway up when I realized Flare was talking to me. "You alright, Hired?" I didn't respond. Just kept walking. "You both seemed a little worked up. It's a hard situation but..."

"Shut up. What do you know?" It seemed like I was stepping so hard I was leaving indents in the dirt.

"I have family you know. Two younger brothers, but even though I was older, they were bigger, and they loved to pick on me and give me noogies. When I left the Remnants they refused to talk to me at all and pretended like I didn't exist. Since I went back, I hadn't spoken to them. Too afraid at what they'd say." I nodded dumbly. Of course, he had family. I guess it was one of those things I should have asked about. "There's nothing tougher on a pony than family, I understand. So stop moping about it. You have *much* more important things to mope about. Like the fact we are stuck in hostile land with your filly captive to the whims of a tyrannical mad stallion. On the bright side at least you still have your health!" There was a short pause as he remembered the starmetal. "Or... well you have your... stunning good looks." He gave a weak smile.

"I don't know what I'd do without you." I looked up at the casino we were closing in on. Considering we weren't being shot at I guess we... weren't going to be shot at. Or. Something. "I don't like this."

"Which part?" There was the sound of a smirk on his face. "The part where we walk slowly towards a building loaded with snipers and a great deal to kill for? Or the small raider army behind us? What about the fact we have companions captured meaning we can't rebel?" He'd forgotten about the family connections, and the overall stupidity of being dragged into this. All I wanted to do was travel to Bridle Hope and kill some raiders. Instead, in my travels, I'd found out I had accidentally caused the destruction of an entire town and was a direct cause of another being taken over by asshole raiders I was related to.

"Yes." All of the above and more. It felt like my gut was trying to eat me from the inside out.

As we got closer I saw a glint of a scope from a partially boarded up window, but there was no shot. I guess we were in the clear. The facade of the casino was partially worn down by time, but I could still see the vague outline of a cowpony with a comically large hat. The multicoloured neon sign once said 'Black&White Casino' but since only the blue lights still worked, it said 'BCWT AI' which was a pretty stupid name for a casino, if you asked me. So the locals just called it 'the casino'.

We reached the large double doors without a fuss, but when I tried to push through I found it locked. Or barricaded. I was sure that I was more than large enough to break the whole thing down if I felt like it, but that would not have helped my attempt at negotiations. So instead I raised a hoof to the wooden door and knocked a few times with a heavy thumping sound.

On my EFS I could see far too many red ticks on the other side, and only a few green ones. If I strained my ears I could hear the sound of voices beyond the doors. As I tried to listen I noticed a few of the red ticks turning green. There was a loud crash and a few more turned green. It wasn't long that all the ticks on my EFS were green. There was a scraping sound, another crash, and finally the doors opened.

"Workin' with raiders now?" A pair of purple eyes peered out of the casino at me. "I wish ah could say ah was surprised." A beautiful white pony with a thick red mane strode out of the casino with a bit of a swagger. I would be lying if I said it didn't cause my eyes to lock onto her flank... er. Her cutiemark. It was an apple.

"Pearly..." I said slowly. It had been a long time since I last met the beautiful pony I'd had a one night stand with, and we did not leave on the best of terms. Mostly because I told her of my plans to assassinate a town member, and while she didn't like her she still took exception to who I was hired by.

I barely stopped her from killing me. "It's been a while."

"Ain't been long enough, hon. Not nearly." There was no warmth in her smile. "Now, last I saw you, you were running back to a group of slavers with... product at your heels." I guessed that after I killed Nanny Jane she watched me take Serenity away, but I had hoped she hadn't. "Where is she now? Safe in the hand of murderous thugs?"

"Well..." I looked back at the camp. "They have her so I don't betray them... I never gave her to the slavers."

She laughed and moved in close, wrapping a foreleg around my neck and kissing my cheek. I didn't even have time to blush. "I know." There was a hint of playfulness in her voice. "Heard from a reliable source. I'm glad. You seemed like such a good mare when we first met, an' it didn't sit right knowing you'd stoop so low." If only she knew how low I would stoop.

"Hired, hold your libido. What would Platinum Haze think if she saw you like that?" Flare said. I flushed red and pushed back. This was no time to be blushing, damnit. "You don't want to cheat on an alicorn, given their phenomenal cosmic powers."

"Is the lad daft, Hired?" Pearly gave me a quizzical look before turning to the entrance. "Alicorns and the like." She scoffed. "Come inside before you get shot up." Better advice I'd never heard.

The entrance hallways to the casino had been reconfigured to the point I could barely recognize it. Nearly all of the lights were out, and the ones that were on were dim and made shadows dance in the strangest places. The dimness helped to disguise the plethora of traps loaded around the room. All of them had been deactivated, but as we passed, I heard ponies behind me sneaking out of hiding spots to set them up again. All in all, I saw four shotguns loaded on trip wires, three mines, and four pressure plates that appeared to be connected to a rope on the wall. I followed one of the ropes to the ceiling where there was a fake panel and probably something heavy hidden above to fall on the unsuspecting. Or boiling oil if they were feeling old-school. Overall, it was an impressively macabre hallway that, if you included the ponies apparently hiding out to ambush attackers, would tear the raiders to pieces. Not enough though, not nearly enough.

The door at the end of the hallway led to a vaguely familiar sight. The Bridle Hope casino floor was set up like a hexagon with the outermost, and largest, ring used for slot machines (mostly Rainboom Riches and Fishing for Winnings.). The middle ring was traditionally used for blackjack, poker, and craps, while the centre was the high rollers table. The whole place was meticulously designed so every side looked the same, and finding your way out was beyond difficult. When I first saw it, I had thought it was the height of old world preservation, but after seeing Dise and all its wonder, I could see where it was starting to wear.

The carpet was dirty and torn, the machines were rusty and broken, and some of the tables had large holes in them. It looked even worse now that it was full to bursting with ponies from the town. Most had set up crude tents and quarantined areas as their 'homes', but the chaos of it all made the whole place look that much worse.

"Home sweet home," Pearly said. There was a hint of bitterness in her voice. "Lucky for us, armies are easy to spot; we were able to bring everypony in here before they got close, but they've held us here for days. Eventually food is going to run out, and then what? They know it too, and they're waitin' until we're half-starved and can't fight back. Ain't like no raiders I've ever seen. Bridle Hope has been attacked before, and we've retreated here. They always try to charge the front door and our traps tear them to pieces. Now though... They're fucking waiting."

I followed her as she snaked past a Rainboom Riches machine. "They want you to surrender," I said as

she stopped to wave at a group of stallions sitting around a craps table drinking. “They want me to tell you to surrender. They promise nopony will get hurt...”

“The day ah trust a raider is the day ah die.” She looked back at me with her hard purple eyes. “Don't play the fool with me, we can't trust them. They want us to put our guard down an' they'll gut us. Every last one. I've been trying to convince the mayor to bring the fight to them, but she ain't listening. She says now that we have 'The Hero Of Wending' that they don't stand a chance. I think she's a damn fool”

“Hero of Wending.” I could already hear him preparing a joke. “Been up to Wending once or twice back when I used to do caravan runs. Nice little town but built on top of a radscorpion nest. Once time I near got stabbed by one of those beasties. Heard something on the radio about a mother daughter team clearing those fuckers out and blowing a twenty foot tall bastard to hell.” That sounded familiar. I guess. Also it wasn't a joke so I was disappointed.

“The very same.” We moved slowly around a table but Pearly had to stop and tell a filly to get back to her mother before we could continue. “She didn't look that impressive, but the description matches, so what can I say?” In the centre of the casino was a large walled-off tent structure that we seemed to be moving towards. “They say she cleared out a raider base by herself, and stopped a mysterious plot to poison a town's well. I guess when she heard about the army she came here to help.” Now she sounded like a right saint.

“Does she have a name, or are we expected to call her 'Miss Hero'?” Flare paused to smirk. “Not that I have a problem with that, I'd just prefer a real name. How about Lightbringer Jr.? Part-time Security? The Ghost's Apprentice? Merchant's Bagboy? You know, something catchy like that. She is a little hero after all.”

We stopped in front of the entrance flap to the centre tent. “If you call her that, she might just stab you. I hear she's fond of that. Her real name is Pinprick”

“How... heroic.” I said looking up at the tent. It was a large cloth thing that hung from a rafter and fell down in almost a cone shape. Without any further adieu, we pushed our way in. All the gambling tables that would normally be in the area were flipped on their side and pushed to the side, pinning the cloth down and making something almost similar to a wall. Inside the tent I noticed four ponies.

One was a pale yellow pony with a light grey, almost white, mane who was currently fussing over a large pink cannon. A party cannon, I remembered them from the Clips And Clops. The other two were playing cards, and must have been the so called 'heroes'. The filly was light grey with a purple mane and a devious smirk on her face as she held up her cards in a field of magic. The other was deep grey with a spikey red mane and an unsettling look in her eyes. The two of them looked vaguely familiar. I watched them and tried to figure it out as the pair dropped their cards and the filly raised her hooves in victory.

“Woohoo.” the filly grinned. She turned, looking to brag at the grey maned mare no doubt, when she saw me. “No way!” She gasped running up to me. “My prisoner!” She giggled looking up at me. “What're ya doing here? You escaped, I heard, and momma said we had to leave but...” Who the heck was this filly? Flare looked over at me and shrugged. I looked over at the filly's mother who seemed to smile sadistically at the sight of me.

Then I looked at her cutie mark. A bloody dagger. The memories came flooding back all at once. I was captured by raiders and met these two there. Then when I took Serenity to them and killed Silver Bullet, I spared her and told her to take her daughter... Spitshine. Right. Her Daughter Spitshine away so they could do better. It never occurred to me that the heroes I had heard on the radio could be them!

“Bloody Dagger!” I shouted at once waving my hoof at her.

“Pinprick, you fucking git.” Pinprick. Right. Bloody Dagger was never her name, just what I knew her as. She grinned at me through yellow teeth and walked up to her filly. “Remember this fucker?” she asked Spitshine. The filly grinned and nodded. “She was fucking mad when you had to leave, she’d have liked to fuck you, but what can you do?”

“Another part of your mysterious past I'm guessing?” Flare seemed amused. “They just keep piling on today.”

“Oh, you got a birdy to fuck then? Looks a bit skinny for my tastes; a pretty little cunt, too.” Was Flare blushing? I hope so.

“We're friends. What the hell happened?” Everypony in the tent was staring at us now. Pearly for her part seemed to be enjoying it. I guess Pinprick here was how she knew I hadn't thrown away all my morals before. I was still in shock it was her. It had been so long, I thought I would never see her again.

“Tried to leave that damn place with Spitshine like you said, but didn't work so well. Fuckers got up in arms and we had'ta clear them out.” Spitshine helped by making a 'Bang' sound. “A whole lot too, and it weren't easy I tell you. Managed to stumble half bleeding to a small town. They healed us up, and in return I helped fuck up some idiot fuckers who tried to attack.” She paused. “It felt good. Doing good, and after the radscorpion incident we just got used to helping idiot fuckers what can't fight. Feels good, even if it's stupid.” She paused. “You were right, I think, and a cunt like you being right pisses me off. I was playing raider because that's what my momma did, but I ain't never enjoyed it. Once we were free things got better. So thank you, you fucker.”

“You're... welcome?” I wasn't sure what to say.

“That's it? Fuck, you're a piece of work. Was manning the sniper when I saw you coming and convinced these fuckers you were good to deal with. Even this cunt,” She waved a hoof half heartedly at Pearly. “Wasn't so sure you weren't a fucking agent, but you know I talked them out of stringing you by your feet. So you best be thanking me too.”

“Thanks...” I turned my head to Pearly. “You were going to kill me?” She had least had the courtesy to look ashamed at that.

“Well darlin' when last I saw you...” She paused and let me fill in the blanks. “I mean I didn't want to think but considering the circumstances...” Yeah. I guess I couldn't really blame her. I mean we hadn't ended on good terms, and if I had been in her horseshoes I'd think the same thing.

“It begs the question.” A soft voice I didn't recognize said. Looking around I saw the grey maned pony hunched over the pink cannon was speaking. “What you are here for?” She stood up slowly and wrenched her neck sideways so it cracked. “You are here on the behalf of the raiders, aren't you?” I stared blankly at her. “Oh, where are my manners? I'm Mayor Buttercup, I saw you once when you were unconscious, but we haven't met proper.”

“Hired Gun...” I said slowly, eyeing the blue pegasus to my left to make sure he didn't correct with my real name. “That is Flare. We are here for them... they have friends of ours. Won't release them until we deliver a message. They will attack. Show no mercy. Unless you surrender. Then everypony gets to live...”

“Let them come.” The older yellow mare grinned. “We have the heroes here, and the casino is a death trap. They don't stand a chance.”

“Now I don't want to tell you how to run your town... casino... thing,” Flare said, “But you don't stand much of a chance, and I'll tell you why. From what I have seen they have you outnumbered three to one. That wouldn't be that bad since you have a position of power but it seems they have better

training, and equipment. Hell, a few of them have pipbucks and know how to use them. If you fight them they will tear your townfolk in half, hero or no. No offence, Pin.”

“None taken, been trying to tell this fucking cunt the same thing for hours now, but she's not a listening type bitch.” It was good to see that despite trying to be heroic 'Bloody Dagger' still took time out of her busy schedule to swear like it was going out of style. What kind of hero swears that much anyway? Seriously.

“What other option do we have?” Buttercup said her voice annoying high. “We fight or we die, there are no other options.”

“That's just retarded, pardon my language, but for fuck's sake, dyin' ain't in the schedule,” Pin said as her filly jumped on her back and rested her forehooves on Pin's head. “I'm saying we set the best in your hallway of death when they attack, and send the rest out fleeing out the back. Hopefully they don't grow a brain and put some ponies out back too. If they do that, well we try to punch a hole through and run as fast as we can.”

“What you're asking is for ponies to die voluntarily,” Buttercup said. “Anypony left to defend here in your plan will die.” She shook her head. “That is not an-”

“The other option. Is we all get fucking torn to bits. Do you know what raiders do to prisoners? I fucking do. We want as many of these fuckers as far away as possible when they get into mutilation mood, that make fucking sense to you?” Pin stomped her hoof. “Some will die so the rest can live, now that's a fucking plan. Ain't a good one, but one that doesn't have a 100% failure rate.”

“They have nice kids here, don't want 'em to die,” Spitshine said sadly. “So it's the best plan. We'll lead the escapees and 'bang' anything that gets close. This way most survive!”

“Ya'll know my opinion on the matter,” Pearly said.

All eyes turned to me and Flare. “Running is the best plan... the Crimson Hoof is not kind if you oppose them. Either that or surrender.” There was a look of shock on the other ponies' faces. I guess that option was off the table completely. Exactly what I wanted to hear... “But. We have companions caught... a filly. We can't let them die.”

“But you'd let my ponies die so others can escape?” Buttercup said. She sounded upset, and I guess she decided it was all my fault.

To my surprise it was Bloody Dagger. Er, Pinprick who came to my defence. “As if fucking volunteers are the same as random fucking cunts that got fucking captured. One's a filly too, so no fucking way we can stand back and let that bitch get a knife shoved up her ass, you hear me?” You know if you looked past the way she swore as much as everypony I had ever met combined, she was actually nice. I suppose. At least, she was trying to be.

“Well...” Pearly started, “once they attack, you two can swing around the side and rescue them.” There was a awkward pause. “Unless.. ya don't think he'd shank them 'fore that, do ya?”

I wanted to say that I wouldn't put it past him, but Flare cut me off. “I wouldn't say likely. The guy we talked to seemed like the kind who enjoyed lording power over ponies. If he did kill Serenity or Stakes then he wouldn't have power over us, and we'd have no reason not to strangle him with his own entrails.” He shot me a knowing glance. “That one flips the shit if Serenity is even hinted as possibly maybe being in the proximity of something dangerous. Killing her would be him signing his own death sentence.”

The little filly on Pinpricks head had been smiling but at Flare's statement her smile faded into something similar to scowl. In a tone that left no room for the imagination, she said simply, “You'd be

surprised what you can live through.”

Nopony wanted to think about that. The ponies in the tent looked away and to their own business. The only sound we could hear was the constant background chatter of the rest of the casino. What was worse is that I knew Spitshine was right. And I knew all too well what could be done.

“So... nice cannon. Going to throw a party for the raiders and discuss the issue over tea?” Do I even need to tell you it was Flare who said that?

“No,” Buttercup said, fussing over it, “I’m trying to fix it so it’ll work properly. I bought it for a defensive weapon after I heard the Galicians used it in their casino. We were expecting something... that exploded more.” That was all Flare needed to hear to cause him to flash across the tent push Buttercup onto her back away from the cannon so he could get a better look. “What are yo-” the mayor started but was cut off.

“I can fix it. Trust me, if it explodes violently, you want me on your side.” I couldn’t really argue with that logic.

Pinprick walked towards me and pushed past. “We’re running. I’m going to find some fuckers who want to cover our escape. Think about how to save your little bitch too, Hired. Good luck.”

“Don’t worry!” I heard Spitshine yell as they walked away. “You’ll save her! Well, you better or I’mma be pissed. You’re still my prisoner, and you gotta do what I say.”

“Well...” I looked around. It seemed everypony was busy. Great. I guess I would just wait here. Hoping Serenity wasn’t dying.

“I’m on lookout duty.” Pearly turned and started to leave. I didn’t even notice until I felt her tail stroke under my chin. “You should come too.” I opened my mouth and tried to form words. They refused to work properly so I just nodded and followed.

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We stood on the roof of the casino, looking down at Bridle Hope. It was alive with lights. They danced in the tents that lined the streets and filtered across the town, making it positively glow. Off in the distance I could see the small bell tower of the school from which I had once sniped Nanny Jane. My eyes traced a line from it to the General Shop, which was glowing more than anything else. Inside I thought I could make out movement in the windows. I almost wondered if I could shoot them from here... until I remembered they still had Subtlety.

Beside me, I felt Pearly snuggle up close. For warmth, I hoped. It was almost a beautiful sight if I could forget the fact that my oldest enemy was down there with my daughter captive. That just made the whole thing really dramatic and “pissing me off”-ish.

“It really is a nice little town...” Pearly sighed, resting her head on my neck. “It’s a shame we have to leave. I know you ain’t from ‘round here, but you must understand the hardship of leaving home.” Yeah. When I left Marefort the first time, I didn’t think I was ever coming back, but it wasn’t until Stable 42 that I really understood the breadth of what I’d left behind. Of my failure.

“It’s never easy,” I said simply, as I stood stiff. The nights kept getting colder.

“Must be an eventuality for an adventurer like you. Always travelling from place to place, never stopping for long.”

“We stop,” I said simply. “For a few days. Here. Dise. Timber...” I let the word hang in the frigid air as I imagined the charred corpses and blackened streets. “The stopping is the best part. The world is harsh. The more you move, the more you see. Maybe we should have stayed. One place, never moving.

Would be better.”

“Why not stay in one place then?” she asked.

“I don't know. Been thinking about it. Now, though.” I shook my head. “One place is bad. So is any other. Stayed here, would have had to leave. Stayed at Timber, would have burned. Dise isn't better. It hides murder under flashing lights. There is no safe place.” Even Marefort got attacked, though it was my fault. Timber was my fault. Bridle Hope my fault. Karkhoof even more directly my fault. The blood of the innocents I inadvertently led to death could fill a river.

“So why not make a safe place, hon?” Hon... I focused on the way she said that word.

“Trying to. It's hard.” I smiled down at her. “Don't laugh. But I'm trying to fix Dise. Make it better.”

She laughed anyway, and her voice echoed down to the streets of Bridle Hope below. “Sorry, it's just. That's a mighty big order there, and I ain't sure you're the one for the job.”

“Oh, I'm not.” My eyes fell back on the Bridle Hope General Store. I could only assume Serenity was still being held there as far as I knew, and waiting for me to broker a deal I knew was never going to happen. “Not for me. For her. Serenity... I rescued her that night. Do you remember?” She nodded, a hint of sadness in her eyes. “She hated me. She should hate me. I nearly sold her, but... I couldn't. Killed my employers. Drug her around with me. Now she thinks I should be her mother. Or did think that... So. I need to protect her. Fix it. Give her a safe place. Even if I die trying.”

The words made the world pause for a brief second. I had admitted my desire to myself, but I hadn't really told anyone. Saying it out loud made it seem almost... juvenile and simplistic. Which I was, so I stick to it.

“It's a nice thought, now I ain't sayin' it's not. It's just Dise ain't lookin' to be fixed. Only been down the once, but I hear stories, and it seems to me it enjoys itself the way it is. And the rest of the wasteland is beyond what a single pony can do.” She looked at me and shook her head. “I mean look at you. A few weeks after I see you and you're head to hoof in scars, you lost an ear, have a green glowing eye patch and hell... Hired, you'll die before you fix anything.” I was going to die anyway. Everypony was. If Sky Fall was right I would die much sooner than that on account of the poison coursing through my veins. “I don't want you to die.”

“Why not?” My voice must have been harsh because the force of it sent her flinching away from me.

“I...” She scrunched up her nose at me. “What kind of question is that?!” The correct one. Maybe she didn't want me to die, but when it came down to it there was no reason for her to care. I was an unthinking brute who killed innocents at the command of caps. Maybe there was 'goodness' inside me, but it was covered so much by blackness and failure you couldn't see it without squinting.

“A good one?”

“Now hon, that just ain't fair.” She moved closer but was far more stiff. “I don't want no pony to die, ya hear? You done some rotten things, and I ain't saying those don't count or nothin' but you can do better and I can see that you wanna. You've got a daughter now too, right?” Well yes. Er, no. Something like that. “If nothing else, I want you alive for her sake.” She licked her lips. “And I wouldn't mind finishing what we started when we first met...”

Wait... finish? When we first met, we went out gambling, I got drunk for the first time, er, ever, and I woke up in her house. It didn't take an intelligence chip to fill in the gaps.

“Uh... but didn't we... already.” I felt heat rise to my cheeks and turned my head from her. “You know... after...”

She laughed.

I felt my cheeks start to burn hotter as she said, "Hell no, hon. Don't get me wrong, it ain't like I didn't wanna. You were loaded and stumbling so I helped you back to my house." I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. Whatever came next I really didn't want to know but was going to find out anyway. "We got there, you kissed me, Threw up in my mouth. And passed out."

Well...

That was...

I started talking so fast my tongue tripped over itself as I desperately tried to explain just how sorry I was. What came out though was mostly a jumbled list of nonsensical statements and stuttering, followed by me shutting my stupid mouth glaring at the roof we were standing on, and hoping I'd wake up. My only consolation was that Flare wasn't there to make fun of me about it.

Pearly laughed hard enough to make up for his absence though. "Don't worry too much 'bout it. The nature of whiskey is to make you want a good fuck, and then make you fuck it up when the time comes. It's a tricky mistress." You're telling me. Strangely enough her words did nothing to stop me from blushing furiously and avoiding eye contact. She kept talking, "Hell, if I'da known you'd never drunk before, I wouldn't have given' you any. I worried ya were mad at me for it."

"I puked on you..." I paused. "In your mouth. And you. Were worried about me being mad?"

"Well when you put it like that, you make it sound like ah'm crazy." She chuckled and went back to staring at the town. The raiders down there seemed busy, I saw a lot of vague shapes running back and forth. It made me just a little bit uneasy at the whole situation. Serenity... she had to be safe. I was coming for her.

"Hate waiting." I growled my displeasure.

"She'll be safe." I felt her breath on my cheek, but didn't dare look. "Don't worry. You'll get her. She travelled with you this long, right?" She kissed my cheek. "You'll save her, in time."

"And what would Platinum Haze say if she saw you!" For fuck's sake Flare! I turned my head and gave the pegasus a withering glare as he came floating over with a cannon strapped to his underbelly. "Now I did warn you not to cheat on an alicorn, but no. No pony listens to poor Flare. A terrible, horrible, awful situation. When she tears you apart, I'll be the who'll have to bury you, and do you know what I'm going to put on your gravestone?"

I gave a weary sigh. "Here lies Hired Gun. She should have listened?"

"Damn. You know me too well. I'm going to have to come up with new jokes." Or Flare could just try actually being funny. But for him that might be too difficult. Instead, he flew over to the edge of the roof and slowly lowered the cannon down as Buttercup followed up behind him and unlatched the subtle bright pink cannon.

"You're dating an... alicorn?" Pearly inched away giving me a cockeyed look. "Now ah'm pretty sure alicorns don't exist." Oh, how much she had to learn. "Or is he just fuckin' with ya?"

"It's..." I turned my head to Flare and watched him fuss over the cannon. "Complicated." I shook my head and trotted over to where Flare was, but was careful not to go too close to the edge. The last thing I needed was a reminder of how high I was. Urgh.

"Didn't take long to load this thing up with something that actually goes 'boom'," Flare said as I approached. I looked at the pink cannon cautiously. "Can't say for sure the whole thing won't break down after one shot, but what a shot it'll be! Imagine the explosion. Like music to my ears."

“Will it work?” Mayor Buttercup asked as she hunched over the device, her rump in the air, giving me a good look of her cutiemark (Some sort of flower). “If it does... we might be able to hold them off. If they come through the front. We could hold the town.” She sure was... persistent in that desire. I couldn't blame her. She was the mayor and this was her home, running away could not be easy.

“It'll go boom,” Flare repeated. “Can't say if it'll work twice. Never seen a cannon like this before... who the hell makes a cannon that shoots parties!? It works with, like, counter-logic.” I was going to have to take his word for it. “Interesting design I'll give it that, but still!”

“We're not fighting,” Pearly said. “Just ain't gunna happen. Even if we win, we'd lose over half the town, and that's if. Yeah, we got traps, but these ain't the normal raiders to walk right into them. It's too big a risk. We either make a deal with'em or run to the nearest NCA outpost and hope they are smart enough not to step on the NCA's hoof. It's a risk either way, but I'm going for the one what don't put us up against a large force with superior training.” She leaned lightly on me. “Sides, far as I know the 'hero' is already telling people to start packing up in case we need ta leave in a hurry.”

“Running is better than dying,” Flare agreed. “High Stakes and Serenity needed saving first.” There was a look of frustration on his face when he looked up at the moonlit sky. “If I had Bunker Buster, we might stand a chance. If nothing else, it'd cover your escape.” He kicked the cannon. “Guess I have to be useless. Again.”

“Sticking to tradition Flare? Can't go wrong with that,” I said as deadpan as I could manage.

“Great. You've been around me too long. I can't take the competition. Clearly we need to have a snark off. One on one. Mano y mano. You and I! A battle for the century! I'll write a book detailing it. Okay, on the count of-”

“Flare.” He snapped his mouth shut and grinned. “Shut up.”

“Well.” Pearly smirked. “We have a winner. Ain't gunna make for much of an epic novel though.”

“From my experience, all written work is five percent truth and ninety five percent 'truth’” He wagged his hooves in the air in what I could only imagine was a crude attempt at quotation marks. “So we have plenty of material. Add in a few fight scenes, a tragic backstory and perhaps a megaspell detonation.” he paused for a second with a wicked grin. “I got it! Silver's comeback was so fierce it set up and detonated a megaspell inside her!”

“Now, hon.” Pearly just shook her head. “Now, I know you ain't a unicorn, but you should know megaspells don't work that way... Well... would be cool if they did. Tell ya what, just chalk it up to artistic integrity.” Flare grinned and did a mock bow.

“Is this really the time?” Buttercup didn't seem that amused. That's a shame, because it was actually kind of funny. Which was rare for Flare. Though, I understood her point. Looking out towards the raiders camp, it was eerily silent, but I could make out movement. More than the last time I looked. I knew they weren't going to attack so long as they thought we were still doing peace negotiations (or rather giving the townsfolk an ultimatum), but it was unnerving.

Not nearly as unnerving as a shrill scream that echoed across the town.

We looked at each other. I could hear hearts beating in chests. There was a silent recognition at the looks we gave each other, a realization that we had all just heard that.

A second scream, deeper, but no less terrified. Coming from inside the casino. I tore off my eye patch and looked back at the camp. My green cybernetic eye whirled for a second before I started to see red and purple boxes even in places where I could not see ponies. And they were moving, towards us. The realization hit me a second later: we were just sent here as an overture of peace so that when they

attacked the town wouldn't be expecting it.

I think it worked.

“Flare!” I shouted. “Use that cannon thing 'till it stops working. Then meet me by the general store.” Flare nodded and turned to the cannon as we heard a small voice behind us.

“Come quickly!” Spitshine was running from the stairs that led back to the casino. “They got in through the backdoor. Invisible ones, hurry!”

---

The casino floor smelled of blood, and panic.

I could see ponies screaming and running around wildly trying to gather their things and avoid attackers they could not see. There were pops of sounds and a pony in the distance fell and died in a pool of blood. How could you fight what you can't see? Well, they couldn't, but between my magic sensing and EFS, I could. “Round them up,” I said to the three behind me. “I'll find Pin. We'll punch through the backdoor.”

Off in the distance there was a resounding boom that shook the casino. Good to see Flare was working properly.

My shoulder burned. A few meters away I saw a panicked blue mare backed up against a 'Rainboom Riches' machine, her eyes wide and her hooves covered in blood. In front of her was a recently dead pony, but her attacker was nowhere to be seen. My EFS showed something red nearby but everything was so panicked I couldn't be sure where. I started running towards her. I had to hope the burning in my shoulder could find her attacker. As I moved closer the feeling started to sharpen at a certain point. I took to the air, planted my feet on a stool, and pushed off. As I passed over the top of the slot machine I connected into something.

The invisible pony and I slammed into the ground hard enough that their stealth-buck broke, and I could see her beneath me. I brought my metal hoof down hard smashing through her skull and painting me red with gore. Standing slowly I shook the brain matter from my leg and turned towards the mare I was protecting only to see she had vanished. Gritting my teeth, I looked around. Needed to kill raiders. Save Serenity. High Stakes too, if he was around. Too much to do.

I felt a sharp burst in my shoulder that quickly faded and realized somepony was directly behind me. Swearing, I spun around to, I don't know, kick him or something, only to see a knife flash through the air and hit my would be attacker in the back of the neck. The raider pony twitched for a second before falling over.

“Whatever these cunts are using.” Pinprick waltzed over with a grim look in her olive eyes. “Doesn't last forever. Fuckers came out no where.” The mare leaned over the dead raider and plucked the knife from her spine. “Throwing your weapon is a fucking badass move, but fucking retarded. Lucky for you I needed you alive.” Wait wh-

Before I could react the mare had her dagger so close to my eye I was afraid to blink.

“Well bitch,” she sneered past her dagger, “how'd you like to lose the other one?” Shit, shit, was she working for Smooth Tongue? I felt my heart beat faster and I tried to figure out how I could grab the shotgun from my bag without getting stabbed all to hell. “How much did he pay you? You come here, make us think he's willing to deal. So he can waltz up unprotected. We aren't fucking foals to fall for that. I'm going to pop your eye out and feed it to your master for fuck-”

“You've got it wrong!” I tried to back up, but she twitched and brought the dagger closer. “I didn't know. No idea. I swear it.”

“Why should I believe you, you cunt? You took the job for us back then. Everypony has their fucking price.” I felt a cold sweat run down the length of my spine. Those words were too true to counter. So I tried something different.

“I saved you once. Could have killed you. Gave you the benefit of the doubt.” I gave her the hardest stare I could while simultaneously looking down the length of a blade. “You owe me.” let her think about that for a second. “I need to save Serenity. I promised. So let me.”

“You should do it, Momma.” I heard a small voice say behind me. Spitshine. “She's not a bad pony, and I can tell. Besides, she's my prisoner still, 'till I say she's not, and I forbid stabbing.” The dark grey former raider had a look of pure rage on her face before softening and moving the dagger away.

“I hope I don't regret this,” she muttered. “Spitshine, get your gun. We need to help these fuckers.” The raider gave me a hard look and shook her head. “I hope you're not a lying cunt. If you are, I'll find you and kill you.” That was... good to know. “And no buts, Spitshine.”

The light grey filly trotted over to her mother before stopping to smile at me. Well, smile and levitate her gun up to my head and saying, “Bang! You're dead!” before running after her mother, giggling.

As I watched the two mares leave, I realized that Pinprick might have been the smartest pony I met in a while. Because she did not trust me at all. Maybe it was because she remembered what happened when Silver Bullet trusted me. Not that I was upset over killing that bastard, but it was a good solid lesson on why trusting me was just a bad idea. If only more ponies realized that, then I wouldn't be in a position to fuck so much up. Like right now.

“Can't say ah'm surprised she don't trust you.” I felt the sensation of Pearly's magic as she sauntered up beside me. “Ah don't much either. I want to though. But, I mean, you know?”

“I did kill that one.” I tilted my head towards the remains of the pony whose skull I'd crushed.

Pearly narrowed her eyes at the crushed pony before moving back to look at my bloody metal leg. “Eh.” She shrugged. “Good enough.” With a burst of magic I felt her dig into her bag and levitate a shotgun over to me. Before I could protest and explain I already had a gun in my bag she shoved it in my mouth. “We need to help punch through the raiders at the back. Lets go.”

I mumbled my agreement through the shotgun and scanned the area. Orange boxes and the ponies they were surrounding moved about wildly, but I noticed a pattern of most of them moving towards the back of the casino. I saw a few red boxes, but upon them showing up, most vanished. It seemed that while my EFS could pick up invisible ponies, the functions of my eye could not. Good to know.

I followed after Pearly as we snaked through the casino. She yelled at ponies as she passed, begging them to evacuate before the bulk of their forces came up. Most of the invisible ponies that came through the back were dead or run off, and those who hadn't been were quickly overwhelmed when their stealthbucks gave out.

We reached the back of the casino to see a great mob heaving and pushing towards the exit. It was near chaos, and my EFS was so filled with ticks that I couldn't get a fix on anything. For a second I thought I saw a flash of red though, but when I focused I couldn't make out the proper highlights. Between the EFS and the eye-tech my vision was getting awfully crowded.

“One at a time!” I heard Pearly scream above the din. “One! At! A! Time!” The mob didn't seem to pay her heed and continued panicking in the general direction of the door. With an exasperated sigh and a stomp of her hoof she turned her head to me. “Ah'm going to make sure they all get out. Go on, follow them outside and head 'round to save ya daughter. There's an NCA outpost 'round these parts we're to be headin' to, meet us there.” Before I could properly blush and stammer she kissed me. “We'll have to

try 'gain another time.”

I nodded dumbly, the taste of her lips still overriding all my other senses. Realizing my state of temporary shock, she pushed me towards the mob. The funny thing about panicked mobs is that you can be the largest pony in the world (and I was certainly a contender) but against the heaving masses pushing against you in close quarters you're going nowhere. So instead of fighting I went along with the crowd of ponies.

The cold outside air hit like a punch to the face. As soon as the crowd started exiting the unfortunately small door, the mob became a stampede, but was not so crowded, so I was able to push my way away from the group. After getting a fair distance away, I turned to watch the group tear down the hill in a disorganized mob. At the bottom of the hill, my eye picked out Pinprick and Spitshine (holding a torch above her head). Surprisingly the panicked ponies stopped at her, and formed a semicircle. I could barely pick out her voice above the masses, but I couldn't hear the words.

I stood watching in awe as the supposed hero stood and the ponies gravitated towards her like moths to a flame. Somehow she managed to ease the calm of the ponies as they streamed from the casino and battle raged behind them. Part of me went back to the question, 'what is the nature of a hero?'. For her, I could only guess profanity.

There was a sharp shout. A shimmer of light appeared behind Pinprick and suddenly a pony was standing there, a purple box around them in my sight. The supposed hero turned suddenly, moonlight glinting off her dagger, and a second later the raider was falling in a spray of blood. Without skipping a beat the hero sheathed her weapon and kicked the corpse over and looked back at her mob. She said something I couldn't hear and they all took off into the night, hopefully to safety.

I watched them go for a minute before I felt heat around my cybernetic leg. They just didn't learn did they? I wasn't as fancy as the pony I saved so long ago, but I was damned strong. I bucked the invisible pony behind me so hard the vibration shook up my legs. I turned quickly and fired my shotgun spraying the ground with blood. The blood moved violently and I heard the pony scream. So I unleashed another shell into the pony and it was silent. Even with the user dead, the stealthbuck field stayed active so I never got to see the pony I killed.

Not that it mattered. I killed so many, what was one more?

Before I continued, I made sure to jab myself with one of my Med-X's. I was really thankful they weren't taken, as they'd be a godsend as I prepared to go into battle. Assuming I was actually going to fight anyone at all. The real plan involved no fighting actually, but it never hurt to be prepared. So... yeah.

I headed down the side of the hill away from both the escaping villagers and most of the raider army, but not before turning my pipbuck light off and reattaching my eyepatch the best I could. I had learned something, and the night concealed me as well as it ever could have. The hill on this side was a shallow incline, so when I reached the bottom of it, I was a fair distance from the town proper. I didn't like being so far away from a fight, but it allowed me to loop around virtually unseen.

It didn't take long for me to start moving closer to the town and hit the first of the sparse buildings. Bridle Hope had once been a fairly large town in the pre-war days (judging by the buildings), but now the only occupied buildings were on the main street or nearby, leaving large swaths of empty buildings half broken by time. Which was good for hiding. I knew this because, as I moved through them, I saw two glints of red on my EFS.

There was an old house right in front of me. The roof was completely gone, and it looked like most of the rest of the second floor was too, leaving only most of four walls and a floor. Sentries, I could only

guess, and there was really not a good way to head towards their position without being seen.

So instead of trying and failing to sneak up, I did something really stupid. Beside me were the remains of a small shack (really only two wooden walls barely standing) so I slipped over beside it, then turned on my pipbuck light and took off my eyepatch again (and two orange boxes appeared around their vague shapes). The reacting of the sudden amber glowing thing was immediate. There was shouting, and I saw the the boxes turn from orange to red. Just then I ducked inside the shack and let bullets zip by.

It was almost too easy as I saw a red tick move in my vision. Three. Two. One. Saw a pony move on my EFS and moved my head with it. The pony popped into view around the corner and I took the shot.

And missed. The sentry dove to the ground, and my buckshot sailed over his head. Before I could adjust my aim, something slammed into my side, sending my stumbling, and I heard a gunshot. Pain throbbed in my side, but the med-x I'd just taken numbed it down enough I was able to ignore it. However I wasn't fast enough to stop the unicorn from charging me head on. There wasn't time to think. To act.

So I instinctively stuck out my hoof and rammed into into the charging unicorns horn. The spike slid into the metal plate of my foot only a few centimetres before the unicorn came to a sudden stop. I overpowered a minotaur, who did this raider think he was? I didn't have time to ask as I emptied my shotgun into him. By the time his face was mush the one who shot me was no longer in my EFS. So much for sneaking.

So I kicked the corpse out of my broken shack thingy and went to reload my shotgun. This lead to the startling revelation that I didn't actually have any ammo for it. And that reloading weapons by hoof was really fucking difficult. Seeing no other option, I took out the shotgun Serenity'd stolen a while back and removed most of the shells from that. It had only held five rounds in the magazine (even I wasn't dumb enough to carry a shotgun with a chambered shell), but Pearly's loaner only fit four at most anyway, so I guess it worked out in the e--. Wait. By the time I'd realized the foolishness of partially unloading a weapon to load a less-useful weapon, I'd already finished. The thought of going through the whole thing, including clearing the chamber and digging the round out of the dirt, was so frustrating, I merely stomped my hoof and put Serenity's gun back in my bag(It still had a single thought, so I guess I could use it if I ran out).

The night was still dark, and full of raiders. None nearby me, but at the top of the hill I could see a large group. There was no point being sneaky anymore so I took off at full gallop through the blackened streets. I knew exactly where the general store was, and it didn't take me long to get there. It was thankfully unlocked, and I burst through the door without ever checking my EFS.

"Silver." I ran face to face with my brother. "It took you longer than I expected."

Thanks...

"It's fine, I suppose. You did your job admirably. Job, meaning 'be a distraction'." Did he have to say it like that. It was really annoying. I stomped my hoof and glowered at him.

"Get out of the way," I said. There was no room for misunderstanding in my voice. I'd let him live last time out of shock, but now I truly understood how hard he'd fallen. He would get no mercy from me, and certainly not if he stood in the way between me and my daughter. I knew Serenity was in there, and I wasn't about to let him keep her.

"Okay." He stepped sideways letting me look straight down at the door. "I'm not stupid enough to actually get in the way." Oh... I guess that was a good point. "You don't get it, do you, Silver? What we're trying to do here. Do you know the first thing we're going to do when we claim the town? The

very first thing?" I stared blankly at him, trying to explode him with my mind. "Build a wall."

"What?" I didn't move forward, I couldn't risk leaving my back to him.

"A wall." He stated again and rolled his eyes at me. "Large structure around a settlement designed to keep the ponies inside it safe. We're going to build them a wall and establish trade routes to Equestria. They'll become rich, and safe by our hooves. We aren't the bad guys, Silver."

"You are." I shuffled right so I could move closer to the door without putting my back to him. "You kill ponies. You rule by fear and intimidation." I licked my lips and kept moving. "You're murderers."

Then he said in a voice so hushed I had to strain to hear, "And you're not?"

That stung enough for me to physically wince away. I was a murderer... I killed Post Haste, and countless others. I killed three ponies that very night. Ponies who had mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and friends. Regardless of why I was a murderer, I destroyed Timber, and Karkhoof through my actions. I felt tears start to sting my eyes, but I forced them away.

"So call me whatever you want. Murderer, raider, villain. But don't stand there looking down at me from your soapbox and tell me that you're innocent." He spat at my hooves. "We're going to save the wasteland piece by piece. Build up our influence and bring peace wherever we go. Even if we have to kill ponies to do it. Maybe we are evil, but we're evil because it's the only way to win. And we will win." He shook his head. "Sorry, Silver, you failed."

I took a tiny step back towards the stairway. Thoughts of my failures seemed to float around, taunting me. Post Haste run past me burning. Wildfire smiled at me with her head half shattered. And Foundation... I heard words in my ears.

*I never wanted this... for either of us.*

The little pony in the back of my head screamed, *Survive*, but all I could do was turn and run away.

The run was so familiar. I could feel the pain in my heart, and the tears stinging my eyes. I remembered the sounds of voices below, and the way my legs shook in fear as I moved. When I reached the bottom I saw Serenity like I saw her the first time. Curled up in a sad little pink ball, before sitting up and looking at me with her sad grey eyes.

Her legs were shackled again, and I ran to her and snapped the chains off with all my strength before dropping down and embracing her. I let the tears flow down my cheeks as she buried her face into my good leg. "It's okay," I said as she sobbed. "It's okay. Mommy's here. You're safe. I came back." I licked at her cheek. "I won't leave you again. They won't hurt you. You're safe now." I murmured all the soothing words I could think of, until I just let her sob. She never should have come with me. If I was smart I would have realized that earlier.

"I'm sorry. I-I tried to be strong. I was just... so alone and... and I thought *she* was coming back an-."

"Shh." I whispered. "It's alright. You're safe. She'll never hurt you again." I had killed Nanny Jane once, and if she came back from the dead I would kill her again. Damn it, I never should have brought her here. I should have listened to Haze. But that would have been the smart thing to do. I kissed Serenity on the top of her head. "I'm sorry."

There was nothing left to say, so I just laid there, holding her. If my words could have taken away the bad that had been done to her, I would have said anything, but I was powerless. I couldn't take away her past, so I had to try and give her a future. If nothing else.

"Silver." I looked up across the room to see High Stakes standing there. "Took you long enough." He shook his leg where he was chained up to the wall. "Reminds me of old times..." His voice trailed

away. "I'll have to tell you about that sometime."

"I'm sorry..." I addressed to him, still holding my filly tight. "How're you holding up?"

He grit his teeth and looked a bit overwhelmed. "Better than her, but not as much as I would like... Don't worry, I'm fine. But if you could unshackle me..." He jingled his leg chain again. "It'd be a nice gesture."

"Yeah." Ever so gently, I helped Serenity onto my back where she grabbed onto my mane and held it tight. With a kick I was able to free High Stakes from his chains. I knew how much it hurt Serenity, but the memories could not be pleasant for Stakes either. "What happened?"

"They threw us down here as soon as you two left, and didn't return. Serenity... did not take it well but would not listen to me. I'm sorry, Hired. I tried." He sounded sincere to me, which was a bit of a shock. Not really knowing what else I could say, I patted him on the shoulder.

"It's fine. C'mon. Let's get out of here." Another day, another failure. Not only did I fail to save Bridle Hope, but I was unable to secure the trading contract House wanted, and as an added bonus, re-traumatized my filly. Today was going wonderfully.

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The shop was empty when we returned, and I was thankful for it. I didn't know what I would do if I saw my brother again, but whatever it was it wasn't fit for a foal's eyes. Thankfully, when we exited the store Flare flew down to greet us. Just as planned. Which seemed to be a rarity.

"Hey... you two look like shit." He must have been addressing High Stakes and Serenity. "We don't got time to talk about it though, as them raiders are a wee bit miffed that I exploded them, you know?" He tilted his head towards the exit. "Like, now. Before they shoot me. You all know how much I hate getting shot, right?"

"I'm not going." I was determined. "I'm going to find Smooth Tongue. And Kill him." I turned my head to Serenity on my back. Her face was streaked with tears, and it broke my heart to leave her... but I had to do this. I refused to let him win. Not again. "I'm sorry, Serenity... I'll be back. I need you to be strong and go with Flare. You'll get to fly. You love flying."

She nodded weakly and jumped over to Flare's back hugging his neck tight. "We'll wait for you, Mommy."

"Hey, Hired Gun," Flare said as he started to float into the air, "er, or Silver Storm... Hired Storm? Whatever your name is. Don't die. You either, Stakes. Dying is bad, got it?" We both nodded our approval as he took to the air and leisurely floated away.

"So." I looked over to the pale green unicorn with his usual unreadable expression and shiny glasses. "You're coming with me?" He gave me an enigmatic smile.

"That I am. Someone has to keep you alive." There was a pause. "How are you going to find him?"

Oh yeah, that was a good question now, wasn't it? I mean, he had to be somewhere, but it was a large town and he could be anywhere. Not to mention the multitude of raiders just about everywhere who wanted my head. I was starting to think this was just an insanely bad plan on every level. Which meant something was about to go very wrong in about three seconds.

"You won't need to find me."

That voice.

I turned and pulled out my shotgun aiming down the street. Smooth Tongue was alone and limping his

way down the main street at me, his grey mane blowing around in the wind. I took a few steps ahead over passing High Stakes. He didn't move to follow, more content to watch my back for me.

“They call me stupid.” I scoffed. Moonlight gleamed off my shotgun as I aimed. “Last words?”

“Stupid, stupid Silver.” The Stallion shook his head. “You really are predictable, did you know that? I knew you'd never give them my offer, and I knew you'd come back here to save your foal. You served well as a distraction, but you need to understand that's all you are. You can't beat me, and you're going to die if you try. I don't want you to die, Silver. I knew you'd be here, and looking for me. So, instead of risking the lives of my men, I have chosen to meet you myself. Let me talk, and please, Silver, listen. I just want you to listen.” I saw no reason to. He could talk anypony out of their barding if he was given enough time.

“You want me to serve.” He wanted everyone to serve him. That's all he was capable of. He pictured himself above everypony, looking down and expecting those below him to do his bidding without question. Well I was standing above him, and I had a fucking gun. “I won't.”

“Reconsider. I could give you a home.” There was a touch of sadness in his voice. “A purpose, a life. You would be able to do something good for the wasteland, instead of destroying it wherever you go.” He took a step forward, and I steadied my gun, causing him to pause. “You think I'm some evil madman, ‘Join me and we can rule together,’ all that tripe, but it's not the case. I want you to join me, but so I won't have to do something I would regret.”

I felt my hate rising up inside me. This bastard really thought I was going to give him the time of day.

“Think about it, Silver. All the caps you could ever want. A job paying twice as much as you get now, no strings attached. A permanent home, and the opportunity to rise in the ranks. You'd have security for your foal, and whatever loved one you could want to bring. You'd have caps to spend, things to spend them on, and goals to achieve. You could bring peace. You know it yourself, the only time Marefort was attacked was when it cut ties with the Crimson Hoof. So long as we are in charge no harm would ever befall you.” Except when you killed my mother and stole my brother.

“No. Never.” I bit down hard at my shotgun. “You die tonight.” Behind me I could feel High Stakes levitate the black and pink shotgun out of my saddle bag. It was good to have backup.

The olive stallion gave a heavy sigh and pushed back his thick grey mane. “No, Silver. You never understood, did you? Did you really think I was only going to offer this to you? Are you so arrogant to think I wouldn't give the same offer to your friends?”

The black and pink shotgun clicked behind me.

“I'm sorry, Silver. I really am.” High Stakes' smooth voice wafted from behind me. I tried to scream. To turn. To stop him. I had to. “It's just business.” I saw the glint of his glasses and then...

Bang.

Level Up!: Despite failing in everything you did, you still gain a level! That sure is... Well, it's something.

New Perk: Adaptive Eye Programming 1: Your practice with your new eye has paid off, increasing the range of its EFS, and improving its threat-level indicators. In addition, you've noticed your eye has the ability to see the awareness levels of ponies in the vicinity for enhanced sneaking!

((A/N: As usual I am here to express my gratitude to those who made this story possible and non-sucky. Such as the great Kkat, for writing her fabulous story, and my editors theBSDude, Errant Indy, and Julep. I love you all.))



## Chapter 18: So Says The Mirror

*“Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.”*

High Stakes' shot tore through the air, missing me completely.

Instead, it hit Smooth Tongue dead centre in his chest, making his red eyes go wide in shock. The olive stallion reached for his chest. Blood welled up around his hoof and dripped to the ground. The pool of blood grew as life drained from his eyes. He had lost. He saw it now. Everything he tried to do was for nothing. He thought he could turn my friends against me, but he was dead wrong. When I walked up to him, planted my shotgun on his forehead, and pulled the trigger, he was dead too.

And it couldn't have happened to a nicer stallion. As I was showered by his blood and brain chunks I couldn't help but laugh. Finally. Finally! My greatest enemy paid for all the wrong he did to me. It was just so sweet.

I could have stayed there reveling in the moment forever. It was just so... so sweet.

Until I opened my eyes.

Vague images above me. Voices, I could hear voices.

“She's waking up!”

“It's too soon, she should still be out.”

“She might complicate the surgery.”

“Get the anesthetic. Blackwater wants her alive.”

Alive. I was alive. My heart was beating in my chest I could hear it. Where was I? Ponies moved above me. I could see them. They all had black faces. Blood. I could see so much blood dripping from their heads. Where was I? Why was I alive? I had been shot. In the head. I remember the pain. There was so much. I couldn't escape it. Why did it hurt so much? Somepony shot me. Somepony.

“Looks like it's infected. Dammit, we need her to stop struggling.”

“We should just kill her. They don't really need her, just her pipbuck,” a familiar voice said. “End her suffering. And besides...” My brother. That voice, I knew it. It was my brother. “She's too dangerous alive.” Alive. I was dangerous, but I was dying. I could feel my heartbeat getting weaker. Why did everything hurt so much?

“No, she is to be sold alive. Never let a tool go to waste.”

To waste. I was going to waste. My efforts thrown into the fire of Dise to fuel its hatred and its strife. Nothing I did helped. All I could do was destroy and make things worse.

Something was placed over my muzzle and I started counting backwards like a voice in my ear told me. One hundred civilians killed by my carelessness. Ninety-nine foals without parents. Three towns destroyed because of me. Karkhoof, Timber, and now Bridle Hope. Two friends I had left who didn't betray me. One bullet into my skull.

---

I lay in bed, unable to sleep. The darkness was engulfing and all-encompassing. Far off in the distance,

I thought I heard shouts, but I ignored them. Marefort was never quiet, even when it was. Marefort was a cramped sort of living. Ponies piled on top of each other, and crammed as tight as possible in a huge building that loved to echo, and you could imagine how well it worked if you were a light sleeper. It made... interludes with Wildfire difficult, when ponies living below us called for us to quiet down. Not that we had the chance that often anyway with Foundation living with us, but it was awkward when we did have the opportunity.

For some reason, when lying in bed contemplating life, my thoughts turned to sex. Clearly I'm well adjusted. I rolled over trying to put a leg over Wildfire to find her missing. She must have left to take Foundation to the bathroom. She had lived in Marefort for almost a year, but was still afraid to walk around it at night. Not that I could blame her, if you didn't know your way, you'd trip and fall, and while Marefort lacked many things, it did not lack places to fall from.

I hoped she would be back soon. The night was bitterly cold, and her warmth made it easier to bear. I don't know how I ever used to sleep alone. For a second I wondered if Wildfire felt the same way, but I doubted she ever slept alone. No, I didn't mean that in an insulting way, but I knew Wildfire well enough to know that before she found me she was quite... insistent on looking for love. We had more than a few discussions on the subject. Long awkward discussions. It still made me uncomfortable, but we all had our burdens and issues, and so long as I understood hers, I was okay.

There was that sex thing again. My head was the gutter when lying alone in bed. There was another scream from far away. It wasn't playful like the one before.

And it was followed by more, and more.

There was a smell of smoke that made me sit up in my bed and think of a name I shouldn't have known. "Wha..." I murmured, my mind coming off it's half asleep daze. Something was wrong, something was very wrong.

There was a sharp knock on my door. With a groan and a feeling of dread, I rolled onto my hooves and slowly made my way to the door. It was not a long walk, as the house was small, but the knocking got louder, and louder. The feeling of dread did not leave when I got to the door, and was not helped that when I opened the door to look down the barrel of a gun.

"Hello," a voice said, way too cheerfully. "You're coming with me," a mare stinking of blood said from the shadows, her face half illuminated by the purple glow around her horn and the rifle.

"Yeah." I spat at her hooves. "That's going to happen." A shot blared out in the night, but I had known she was going to shoot and had ducked low before the trigger was pulled. I charged forward and rammed my shoulder into the pony's neck with the full force of my girth. She gasped as I pushed. There was a brief second when I felt her try to push back, but she wasn't nearly strong enough. With a final grunt I felt her slip off the edge of the Marefort landing. She shrieked loudly as she fell, but not for long.

I peered down at the darkness but didn't see the body in the blackness. I heard things though. Shouts of pain, cries for help. They came from everywhere and nowhere at once. Actually, as dramatic as that sounded, they definitely came from somewhere. Below me actually. I heard a shout of confusion and a grunt of pain. Whoever these fuckers were, they weren't going to get away with touching my Marefort.

I skidded back to my doorway to the mare's dropped rifle and picked it up. I wasn't the best with mouth-fired weapons, but it was going to have to do. Back when I had been a little filly, I'd known the best routes around Marefort. I wasn't as agile as I'd been back then, but I still could get around better than anypony I knew when I was in a rush.

Moving quickly to the edge of the walkway I'd thrown the mare from, I dropped off. I grabbed the

edge with my fore hooves and swung twice. Letting go mid-swing, I slammed through the window of the house below mine with a crash. Just as I'd thought, there was a strange blood-smelling pony pointing a gun at Marigold. He stopped to watch me with a surprised look as I crashed through. Good. Before he could point his gun at me, my own was aimed point blank at his head. Even though I sucked at mouth fired weapons, I couldn't miss. His brains painted Marigold's wall.

"Urgh." The sight... it was so... ugh. I turned my head to vomit. How could anypony get used to killing? It made my stomach turn. Wiping my mouth, I looked over at the shaking form of Marigold. She was forever my boss, but I hoped she wouldn't be too upset with me breaking her window and painting her wall. "Are you alright?"

"Dammit. I'm so sorry Silver. So sorry." Why was she apologizing? I broke into her house. "it's all my fault... I never thought." I let her blabber on as I leaned down to pick up my new gun.

"Here." I slid over the dead pony's gun. "Need to save the others." My voice sounded hoarse even for me. My filly was out there somewhere. I knew Wildfire would never let her come to harm, but I had to be sure. Marigold was going to help me, because somepony had to. "What are you waiting for?"

"This is my fault, I never thought..." Tears streamed down her cheeks. What kind of pony cried that much? It was unbecoming. "They're here because of me. I... I... the Mayor, Wildfire, and I. We... don't you know? We cut ties with the Crimson Hoof, we let go of their protection. And now... and now look. Smooth Tongue warned us, we should have listened."

"Shut up." I rolled my eyes and forced the gun into her hooves. "Fight now. Cry later." The golden maned mare just looked up at me with an unreadable expression. "Get up," I said, perhaps too harshly. "Get. Up." I didn't understand what she was talking about. How she'd caused this or whatever. "You caused it. Help me fix it. Take the gun, and let's go save them."

"They're probably all dead," Marigold tried to explain to me. It didn't matter. So long as I was breathing, I would stop whatever was happening.

"Well, I'm not." I trotted out the door, and hoped she would follow me. I hadn't a clue what was happening, but I knew Wildfire and Foundation were out there, scared and confused. It was time to save them. There was no other option, and I would not take failure for an option.

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"About time you woke up."

There were vague memories, things I could not understand. Muffled voices in the back of my mind, and I had been awake before, for a bit. But I could not remember when, or why, or where I was. I was lying down somewhere, as my head pounded and thoughts swirled in my head. Had I always been lying there? Perhaps, and everything else been a dream. Or maybe I was dreaming of being in bed, and when I opened my eyes I would be back in Bridle Hope about to destroy Smooth Tongue. Something touched my shoulder.

My eyes shot open to see a white ceiling with rows of lights that were far too bright high above me. I knew this place, I knew it as soon as I opened my eyes. "Why... why am I here?" Why was I even alive? My head throbbed, and every fibre in my being called out for med-x to make it go away. Things were fuzzy, but I remembered a glint of light from glasses and a sharp pain worse than anything I had experienced.

High Stakes... the memories came flooding back that easily. He'd betrayed me. I should have seen it coming. Smooth Tongue offered him the same thing he'd offered me (when High Stakes was playing captive no doubt), the same thing High Stakes complained House would not offer. Of course he was

going to betray me. It was all about the caps, but I was too dense to see the signs. Stupid Silver gets shot by former friends. Nopony is surprised.

Groaning, I blinked my heavy eyes. The white ceiling was still above me. Smooth Tongue should have killed me, but instead I was alive and, for reasons I could not comprehend, was in the 'Reconstruction Center' inside the mountain. I recognized the aesthetic anywhere, and that could only mean that I was currently in the possession of the Steel Rangers. Again. If I got out of this, I swore I was never going to get captured again.

"You piss yourself in your sleep, did you know that?" That was an interesting statement to wake up to. "Course, you've been out for three days, so I suppose that's natural." A yellow mare peered over me, her white mane falling into her face. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

"Have I threatened you before?" I asked with a weak smile.

"We met once, a long time ago. It seems my memory is sharper. I am Paladin Blackwater." Cool story. "I recognized you coming out of Timber and remembered hearing you'd escaped our base so I had a squad follow you." So Flare wasn't being paranoid when he'd said we were being followed. That was always good news. I needed fewer crazy companions. And ones that didn't betray me.

"So." I sat up slowly, pain lancing through my entire body. "Why did you... buy me?"

"We didn't buy you, we bought your pipbuck," she said, as I looked around the facility. It was, shockingly, exactly the same as when I'd left it back when I helped clear out that raider den. The large stacks of wood were lined in rows and all covered by a strange purple glow. And, most noticeably, it was still obnoxiously white and made my eyes cry out in pain from the brightness.

This was just all too much to take. The last thing I remembered was that I was being betrayed and now I was miles away in the hold of a different group. For all I knew, they would kill me if I tried anything at all, and considering what happened the last time I was in Steel Ranger care I doubted they'd hesitate. So what could I do, weak as I was from my coma, but play along and hope I had an opportunity to escape and reunite with my friends later.

"Why." I said as I watched squads of unarmoured Steel Rangers run drills down the centre aisle, while across from them, pieces of armour were being cleaned and maintained. It was... surprisingly efficient looking. Say what you wanted about Steel Rangers, but they were damned good at what they did, and they made it look good.

"You have a password on it, a password that we need. There was talk of cutting your leg off, but your pet pegasus-"

"Flare!" I sat up as straight as I could, ignoring the pain throbbing through my whole body. My eyes scanned the area again, but I couldn't see them. "How..." He was supposed to have left. I gave him specific orders to leave. Dammit Flare, couldn't he listen to me just this once? I guess our reunion wouldn't be that far away after all.

"After you were sold, he came swooping in, trying to save you." The yellow mare rubbed her back legs together. "Let me say, your filly is one hell of a shot." That was Serenity, alright. Good girl. "They lost, obviously, but he made a good point." That made me very uncomfortable. All of Flare's good points were terrible. "He said, 'why not use you?' This centre is well known for danger, and delusion. We send you and your friends in, if you come back you tell us what to avoid, if you don't we go in full force. At best, we know the dangers of the centre before we have to deal with them ourselves; having to deal with them; at worse, we will do what we planned to do all along."

"And my pipbuck?"

“Has a tracker. How did you think we found you anyway?” Oh, I guess that made sense.

“What... is on my pipbuck exactly?” That seemed to make the mare perk up and grin confidently. I did not like that at all. I didn't like any of this, and my head (not to mention the rest of me) was still killing me. Being in a coma for three days would do that, but if only I had some Med-X I could make it go away.

“A password, like I said. You downloaded it at stable 123 with an audio log according to the stables computers. Luckily, the computers kept a record of the tags of all the pipbucks to connect to them. I don't suppose you know about magical resonance?” I shook my head, and that just made her grin more. “Stand up and follow me.” Reluctantly I did, and noticed for the first time I was surprisingly unshackled (and naked). “You!” she called to a knight we passed, “Go fetch a squire, a unicorn squire.” That didn't make much sense, but I kept walking and wishing I had my saddle bags and inventory with me.

We did not walk far, just to the nearest stack of wood with a glowing magical barrier around it. Stepping up to it she tapped it with a hoof making it ripple and glow, but not budge. “This is a magical barrier. Similar, if you will, to the one that once surrounded Canterlot, but smaller, and not as strong. If we wished it, we could fire rockets at it until the barrier fell, but that would be... troublesome and expensive.”

Just then a small unicorn stallion came running over, huffing from lack of breath. “Y-yes, Paladin Blackwater?” The red stallion was sweating profusely and seemed afraid to look the paladin in the eyes.

“Perform a spell,” She said, watching the glowing barrier.

“W-which one Ma'am?” The yellow ranger gave him a withering glare that could melt glass. The squire shrank down more and cast a simple telekinesis spell that made my shoulder burn.

More importantly it had an interesting effect on the barrier. At the closest point to where the spell was cast the barrier glowed brighter than it should have and seemed to be emitting a strange heat. In a circular pattern outside the glowing hot point the glow slowly faded to its normal state, as the spell did not seem to be affecting more than that singular point.

“You may stop.” Blackwater said. The unicorn did, and shrank down more. “This is a perfect example of magical resonance. It is well known that every spell, and every unicorn's magic, has a different wavelength.” I did not know that. “The magical engineers of Caledonia realized magical devices, like a pipbuck, could also produce magical frequencies, but unlike ponies could change their tune to copy a pony's specific wavelength.” So much jargon, my head hurt. More. “They came up with these force fields, along with other triggers, that only react to particular magical frequencies.” She looked over and saw the obvious confusion blanketed on my face. “Think of it... like a magical key. Only one spell can unlock it.”

“I see...” I didn't at all.

With a weary sigh she grabbed my pipbucked hoof and started flipping through the menus faster than I ever could. “Damn thing only works when you're awake.” She muttered until she got to what she wanted, and pressed a button. “This is the password, if you will.” My pipbuck emitted a strange screeching noise and glowed softly, making my shoulder burn with magic. The barrier around the piles of wood reacted immediately and started glowing bright as it did with the other spell, only this time the glow didn't stay in the same place, but grew and grew until the entire barrier was white hot and too bright to look at.

Then it fell to nothing. The stack of wood stood there unimpeded by magic like they were before.

“Woah.” I rubbed my eye, a bit dumbfounded. That was just... insanely cool.

It was about then that the realization hit me that I had downloaded this magical thing in Stable 123. Meaning before I ever went to the reconstruction centre the first time. I could have used it on all these supplies and sold them to make a killing, with exactly zero trouble. If only I understood... anything. It would have made my life easier, and been a huge boon to the wastes.

Instead I let the opportunity pass me by, and now it was useless. It was a punch in the gut after an already crappy day.

Not only was I a failure who couldn't even figure out when she was about to be betrayed, but I also let the chance of a lifetime pass me by because I couldn't work a device I'd owned for over a year. Add that to my already grandiose list of failures and well... you get the picture.

I scratched an itch on my foreleg as Blackwater grinned at me. “You see now what you have on you.” I nodded slowly. “That password is a catchall for every security terminal in the entire building, and if my hypothesis is correct, it will stop the patrolling robots from attacking you. Of course, to make sure, we are sending you and your friends up first.”

I gave her my hardest glare and hoped my physical weakness wouldn't give me away. It didn't help that halfway through my glare my leg spasmed and sent me on my ass. “Why them? Let me go alone.” If they were actually here, and it wasn't a bluff, I wanted them as far away from whatever danger was up there as possible. If the mere rumours of this place had Steel Rangers shaking in their armour, I didn't want Serenity there.

“Because. We want you to survive and come back. That password on your wrist is supposed to disable all security features and make the facility open, but I'm not going to risk the lives of my ponies on that word. I need to know what exactly that password does, and what security features are still active. I need you to check at least the first five floors. At least. Making your filly go with you is...” The yellow mare looked thoughtful. “Incentive. A pony will fight twice as hard for their son's or daughter's lives than they would for their own. The pegasus is simply because he annoys us.” That was Flare all right. “There is another incentive for you to search quickly.”

My stomach twisted into a knot. Whatever she was talking about I could feel it was not going to be good, and it made me feel nauseous. As I wiped some sweat from my brow. I saw her take out a small clear plastic bag. That was... less than climactic. Until I saw what was in it.

A vial of Med-X.

As soon as my eyes fell upon that beautiful syringe, I felt myself lurch forward, and the pain throbbing through my legs felt that much worse. Wincing, I was pulled to a stop before I could tackle her as a cramp in my leg made it hard to really do... much of anything. Gritting through my teeth I said, “That's mine.” It had been in my saddle bags, and she'd stolen it. That bitchy thief!

She laughed prettily, but with a hint of malice. “You could try being subtle about it.” I watched as the bag swung back and forth in her mouth when she talked. “You want this, don't you?”

“It's mine,” I corrected. “I want it because it's mine.” And because everything hurt so damn much, and I needed it to make me feel better. Just a quick jab and I could get the relief I needed. Then I could break out of this place, save Serenity and Flare, kill High Stakes (bastard) and go back to House. I just needed that bag.

“Right.” She smirked as the bag swung. “I'm sure that's exactly what it is.” She dropped the bag. My head followed. She was going to break it. Against my better judgement, I dove and grabbed it in my mouth before it could hit the ground. There was a sharp sense of pride on my catch, followed by a

sharper sense that I should just inject it and get rid of the pain already. That was, until I heard her laughing again.

Looking up, I saw her red eyes flash with clearly evil thoughts. "What..." I asked slowly, though I think I already knew.

"Even in a coma you'd kicked, cried out, and twitched. After your Pegasus swooped in to be easily captured, he suggested Med-X." She smirked. "Imagine my surprise when it calmed you down right away." I knew where this was going. For some reason the bag in my mouth seemed to get a hundred times heavier, as if it was weighing down my very soul. "The last time you were injected was eight hours ago, you already feel the desire don't you? The pain in your legs, the cramping in your gut. You want to cry, but can't see a reason for it. You want to cry out because it hurts too much, as sweat pours from your brow."

Oh shit.

"Congratulations, you're an addict. So, for long as you're in our care, that's the last vial you get until you go up into the centre and come back down to tell us what is waiting for us." There was a devious smile on her lips. "So you better hurry."

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Okay. So maybe I really liked Med-X because it helped make my many, many injuries feel less... injuryful. But I mean, I couldn't really be addicted. I've seen addicted ponies before and they were always so pathetic. I mean Flare was all but lying in the gutter when I first met him, but I was fit as could be. Hell, before I got knocked into next week I was stomping ponies into oblivion. I mean, sure, I think I'd had a med-x or two then, but I was still able to do it. Addicts couldn't, they were weak....

Or maybe they were just weak when they didn't get their fix. As soon as the Med-X was injected in me, most (not all) of the pain faded, and I felt like I could run a mile uphill. So... maybe I was addicted. How could you be addicted to a medical drug though? Shouldn't they be designed so that wasn't possible? Right? I really wanted to be right. So much had gone wrong, being addicted on top of everything just made it all the worse.

I couldn't counter her argument though. Since that fight where Torr had shattered a few of my ribs, I had been taking Med-X nearly everyday. I mean, my life got a lot more hectic around then, but after a while I had stopped taking them just when I got hurt. Then there was the time I had taken the med-x from Haze's infirmary....

I didn't know. All I knew was that I needed the med-x in me for the moment so I could do what they asked of me. Maybe then we would be allowed to leave, and I could figure all this out. It was just. Like a great weight on my brain that refused to go away.

I had bigger problems to worry about. Like being a captive of the Steel Rangers. Again.

"What happened to Timber?" I asked Paladin Blackwater as she led me slowly through the complex. It was an obvious question with an obvious answer, but I needed a source of rage to drive the confusion from my head.

"We burned it." The way she said it like it was trivial made my blood boil. "Not at first. We came galloping over the hills and the townsfolk just about pissed themselves. Not a single pony was shot. Well, maybe one. So we rounded them up and put them to questions." She shot me a knowing glance. "I am not a foal like Curly Fries; when I question ponies, I play for keeps." I don't think I liked the way this was going. "By the fourth death they started talking, but nothing useful."

"Then a pony cracked," I said as we turned a corner around a stack of wood.

“Oh quite right. I believe she was the bartender in town. I wanted to do the mayor first, but we couldn't find him.” She chuckled. Did I mention how much I hated her. Because it was a lot. “So we let the ponies back to their little houses, and then set them all on fire. It was a lovely blaze.” Filled with screaming foals. I could almost picture Post Haste in Timber, running from building to building. “Oh how they screamed.”

“You're sick.”

She didn't even deny it. “I'm strong. The strong survive, while the weak die. It's the way of the universe, and if you tried thinking like that, you'd have more power than you'd know what to do with.” Yes I could *survive* on my strength alone. I could rule a raider gang destroying all who oppose me, but at what cost? I've already done so much that my soul was irreparable. Anymore and I would stop being... whoever I was.

“Disgusting.”

“Would you rather we just kill you?” She snorted. “I could order it. Or should we torture your filly first?” No... “How do you think we got the bartender to crack? Sure, I could have put anypony to the question, but from my experience there is no way to make a pony talk faster than by hurting their children.” I was going to kill her. Rip her head off and shove it up her ass, burn her corpse. Then, I would find a zebra and get them to bring her back to life, so I could kill her again.

Not now though. As much as it made my muscles twitch and my ears roar thinking of the evil she committed, I couldn't act. Not here in the middle of the Steel Ranger base, not while unarmed and weakened. So I did the only thing I could, and walked beside her, using all of my willpower to push down the urge to stab her in the face. It was really difficult. I couldn't even look at her. Just. Ugh. She managed to jump to number one on my 'needs to fucking die list' ahead of High Stakes, Dragonslayer, and even Smooth Tongue.

Once I got back to Dise, I needed to get that list laminated.

“Does that bother you?” Blackwater's voice dripped with maliciousness and made a shiver run down the length of my spine. I denied her an answer; she already knew it. “I really do not understand why that foal knight had a problem with you.” It might have been because the difference in threat levels between her and Curly Fries was the same as the difference between me and Serenity. There was no contest. “Of course he was already an idiot. Do you know he went gallivanting after you when you got away.”

“Yes.” I grunted my response, hoping it'd please her enough to shut up. “We met at Snake Head. Chased Flare away.”

“He actually caught up!” She stomped her hoof once in appreciation and kept walking. “Shocking. He claimed as much when he came back with his head low. Elder Chunky Soup told everypony that you were not to be followed, and called back the Steel Ranger hit squads. He never expected to find Captain Flare or anypony else on the hit list, it was just to shut ponies up. After the fiasco he didn't want to waste any more resources, so when Curly galloped off with his squad, the Elder was furious.”

My entire memory of the Elder was from a single conversation when he warned me about a darkness under Dise. Or, metaphorically under at least, and let us go. He didn't seem to care if we lived or died. Seeing him furious just seemed odd, and out of place. Still, I wouldn't test his patience.

“Eventually Curly came back with his tail between his legs. The Elder came outside to greet the failure himself.” She nickered. “Then, he took out a knife and jammed it through the eye socket of one of Curly's ponies. It was a warning he claimed, and exiled him. Apparently we get to kill him if he shows up again, now won't that be fun?”

Yes, but I was not about to agree with that bitch.

She kept talking, and just about every time she spoke I had to hold back from tearing her throat out with my teeth. “The Elder told us his plan to take this place. He's been salivating over it for decades now, and finally it was open without one faction or another willing to defend it. Nothing but a town with piss poor defences between us and the wealth of the Caledonian military. Don't know why the NCA choose to run with their tails between their legs. Hell, we took more casualties after we burned the town to the ground than we did taking the damn thing. Damn sniper.”

“What happened to him?” We left Grimer ready to give up his life fighting. It was the least I could do, to find out how he died.

“We killed him, of course.” We turned the corner into a narrow aisle between stacks, and at the end a series of tarps and sheets that looked to be a makeshift tent. “Oh, he put up a valiant fight.” She smirked as we moved towards the tent. “Took two of my ponies down, so we sent a rocket up his ass. Wouldn't you know it, he jumped out of the fireball from the second story. I would have applauded but he threw a live mine at me.” Oh, I liked the thought of that. “So I shot it out of the air and gunned him down like a rat. Good show though, it was enough my Knights thought he deserved a proper funeral, instead of a pyre like the rest of the town.” There was a short pause as we reached the entrance to the tent. “I set him on fire anyway.” She laughed and opened the flap to the tent, “We're here. You have one hour to deal with this shit, then we will come for you. You know what happens if you escape.”

With a growl, I entered the dimly lit tent.

Inside I could see the form of a blue pegasus pacing and back and forth along the far wall as a small, light pink pony stood on his back, looking immensely sad. They didn't even turn to me when I entered, apparently used to being checked up on. “Uh...” I said slowly. “Hello...” The tent flap closed behind me, leaving us alone.

“Momma!” A pink blur zipped through the air and attached itself to my neck with such force I nearly gagged. “We were so worried!” The warmth of her hug melted the anger right off me. “Never ever ever do that again! You almost died!” Slowly I kneeled down so she wouldn't be hanging from my neck, and put a leg around her. “We tried to save you, but they shot at us a lot! Can we shoot them back now?”

“Not now Serenity...” I said softly. “Soon.” I looked up and over at Flare who sat guiltily staring at me. The fact he looked guilty was not an encouraging sign. I really hoped he didn't know what High Stakes was planning to do, but considering Flare already betrayed me once, I couldn't put it past him.

“Hey Hired, you're looking well.” He placed a hoof awkwardly on the back of his head. “Well, considering you were out for three days on account of a shotgun to the face.” I hadn't even really thought of that. There had to be scars on my face from it, which was great because I wasn't nearly ugly enough. “We tried to pull off a daring rescue, but it seems I'm useless without an idiot to run ahead of me and soak up all the bullets.”

“Really, Flare?” I shook my head and pushed my greasy mane out of my eyes. “Is this the right time for that?”

“I thought it was funny,” Serenity said from her place buried into my neck.

“See! Serenity has my back.” He grinned for half a second before donning his guilty look. “Did High Stakes really shoot you?” My intelligent response was to stare at him like he had three heads. That seemed to get the point across. “That's a yes then...” He sighed. “That idiot. I can't believe he'd do this to me!”

Wait. Did he say 'me'? But Stakes shot me. I know because I remember his glasses shining when he did

it. I noticed Flare catch his slip up and say something under his breath as a slight blush formed on his cheeks. Why would he be blushing...?

“Wait...” He kept blushing, and it hit me. Since those two had met, they’d seemed to be unnaturally close. And... for some reason I could remember vividly them sleeping in the same room multiple times when no one was around. There was that time The Batmare teleported into their hotel room that seemed to make Stakes really annoyed. Flare's insistence that High Stakes was really good on the inside, his knowledge of Stakes’ history that he apparently didn't tell just anypony. The realization flashed in my head as I stared dumbfounded at Flare. “You and him were... you were!” My voiced spiked high before I lowered it. “Really?”

“How much do I owe you Serenity?” What? That wasn't an answer. Stop avoiding the question, Flare!

“Twenty five caps.” Came the giggly reply.

The blue pegasus took out a small sack and tossed it into the waiting telekinetic field of the filly before saying, “We had a bet. Serenity won.” He gave me a weak smile and I could tell he was trying to force his blush away. “I thought it was going to be three months before you found out, Stakes gave it over a year. Serenity was more optimistic.”

Serenity continued her giggle as I slowly realized that everypony knew but me, and I was really dumb. “I figured you'd walk into 'em kissing eventually.” Kissing... right. I rubbed my forehead as the bevy of new information hit me.

“You and him...” I said again. It may have shocked me more than I realized, and all the more because it was so obvious! “We are the gayest little group in the wasteland.”

“Hey!” Serenity squeaked, finally detaching herself from her hug and taking a few steps back, “I don't like mares, they're dumb.” Wait, did that mean she liked colts? I mean, she was around the age that most ponies got their first crush... I swore then and there that any colt who touched Serenity was going to have a chat with Subtlety. “Colts are gross, too. They have cooties and smell funny.”

“They do not,” Flare scoffed, and held his hoof to his chest in mock pain. “Besides, when have you even met a colt your age?”

“Miss Haze has a bunch in her orphanage, stupid.” With a remark like that, I simply had to smile down at Serenity. It was so amusing when she proved Flare wrong, if only because I was so bad at it.

“So, you and High Stakes...” I said slowly, my head still trying to wrap around the fact. Clearly I'm an idiot, if that wasn't already clear. Flare nodded and smirked a little, which was aggravating. The whole time he had been bugging me about being a fillyfooler, he'd actually been cuddling colts on the side. If he'd just have told me, it would have been easier for me to admit that I was... I'm not a fillyfooler.

“Flare...” I said slowly, keeping my eyes level with his. “Did you know he was going to?”

“If I did, would I have tried to rescue you from my sworn enemies?” He matched my glare with one that was surprisingly intense. “I swear, you act as though you can't trust me. Just because I spied on you once or twice.”

“And dated the pony who shot me in the face,” I added in my usual helpful manner.

“Right, that too. I mean, that's hardly an excuse not to trust me.” I stared blankly. “Eh, I guess it's good enough, but no, I didn't know he was planning on that. You'd think he'd tell me, but nooooo, he had to go off and be secretive. I wouldn't be surprised if he thought I'd approve or something. Sometimes, that stallion, I swear it...” He rubbed his forehead. “He just don't get it, a crying shame. He had such a nice ass too.”

I felt heat rush to my cheeks. “Flare!”

“Eh, you know you liked it.” He laughed as I felt my face grow hotter, and I shook my head adamantly. This was not subject matter fit for fillies. “No... I didn't know he'd do that. I should have guessed though, it's always been about the caps for him in just about everything. Should have seen it coming, but it's too late now. Guess I'm going to have to smack him next time we meet, and we will meet.”

“If you get to him first.” I growled.

“But Momma, what if he was blackmailed into doing it?” Serenity said. “I mean, maybe they took his daughter and held her hostage and and!” The filly gave me a look of such determination I almost wanted to believe her. She didn't believe it either, but she had to hope.

“He didn't have family,” Flare said, “and I wasn't threatened, so he did it on his own, for his own price. Some smart ponies used to say 'Everypony has their price' but I was really holding out that his would be a little bit higher.” I thought he was already paid for, though. It just never crossed my mind that he would shoot me after already being paid not to. Breaking contracts, what has the world come to? “Enough of that.” Flare waved a hoof. “We can discuss his guilt and punishment when we aren't being held by stupidly evil ponies.”

“I was trying to forget about that.” I said. If anypony was stupidly and sadistically evil it was Blackwater. She was no better than a raider, only with a fancier set of armour and much more support. “So what do we do? You know this place. Right?”

“Of it,” Flare corrected. “The Enclave was based way at the top, and most ponies weren't allowed to venture down to the lower levels, not after the rumours of it being haunted started. Ain't never been in the complex proper, but I'll tell you what I do know.”

There was a pause as he stood up and puffed out his chest.

“Ahem,” he started, “I don't know shit.” Huzzah, helpful as always, Flare. “Well,” he continued in his regular manner, “I'm guessing your pipbuck has a key they need, and I'm pretty sure the Enclave took my DNA and put it into the central system so that might help something, but I wasn't allowed into the dangerous areas. Sorry.”

“It's fine.” I said. It was not really fine because Lucky mentioned deadly robots. If I had my gear it wouldn't be a problem, but Subtlety was a long way away (that poor baby) and the rest of my stuff was confiscated when I was... sold. Did that make me a slave? I guess in a sense I was.

Which made my day so much better.

“Are you okay, Momma?” We needed to talk about that too. “Momma? You don't look well.” Maybe it was the fact I just got out of a coma and may have been addicted. “Momma.” I looked down at Serenity and wiped tears out of my eyes. “Don't worry, we'll get out. Because you're here, and when you're here we always find a way out. So don't be sad. Okay?”

Slowly, I put my hoof on her head and ruffled up her mane. “We'll get out of this. You're right.” The little filly batted at my hoof playfully and backed off to stick her tongue out at me. Yeah, it was going to be alright.

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The hour was not nearly long enough. I had hoped in vain we'd figure out a way out of this predicament, but we hadn't even discussed it. We all knew that it was impossible, so we talked about silly things to keep our mind off it. Hell, maybe my worry was for nothing. The facility had been closed for two hundred years, so what was the likelihood of all the killer robots still being active?

Of course, from what I have seen, pre-war Caledonia was very obsessed with having their technology last exactly two hundred years, which was quite helpful. In that it wasn't. At all.

Eventually Blackwater came calling for us with a grin on her face, and flanked by two fully clad Steel Ranger knights. I really didn't now know what Elder Chunky Soup had been thinking when he'd put that bitch in charge. "Are you three done with your love time yet?" she sneered from the tent's doorway. "That med-x won't last forever, so you best hurry, Miss Gun."

Serenity jumped onto my back as I stood up and glared at the bitchy-bitch. "We're coming," I said with my voice dripping with venom.

"Not like that," The Paladin said as something flew through the air, landing on my head and hanging there. "Your barding. We have some old Enclave armour from our war with them. Not pretty, but it'll stop him from becoming dust from whatever security systems this place is said to have." That was good. "The filly gets nothing, so you best be careful, Hired." I gave her my best glare.

When the Enclave armour arrived Flare looked visibly upset at the quality of it, but dutifully put it on anyway. My barding fit snugly on my body, and it made me feel a bit safer, though I wished I had something for Serenity. If we got back to Dise, getting her proper protection would be my number one priority. As I took a step towards the smirking mare, I felt something in the collar pockets of my barding. Reaching into it I saw a small mouth held device I had nearly forgot about.

"Oh you found it," Blackwater chuckled. "The spark pulse emitter you stole from our base. Don't try it on us, but it might help you if you get attacked by a killer robot. Consider it a gift, because you aren't getting any guns. And no, you don't get to keep it when you're done. Also, if you're thinking about using it to escape, don't: everypony knows you have it, and half our guards are equipped with regular barding as a precaution."

I hated it when ponies read my mind.

After that, we were led out of the camp and 'escorted' through the facility. It was a short, silent walk, and the only thing I could focus on was the door we were getting closer and closer to. Something was behind it, and, for who knows what reason, we were the ones who had to go find out what. Honestly I don't think Blackwater really cared, and just felt like putting me in a horrible position to watch me fail.

Oh, and I would fail.

"Look On The Bright Side, Hired," Flare said from behind his rusty new Enclave mask. "We'll Find Out What Wallkirk Was Doing. You Seem To Have Been Focusing On Him Lately, So It'll Be Like An Adventure." Oh yes, I did so love adventures. "You'll Be The First Pony To See This Facility In Two Hundred Years Without Being Killed." As cool as that idea was, it didn't make much sense. If I had the password to unlock this place then the founders of Timber must have had it too, and why wouldn't they have gone exploring? For that matter I couldn't have been the only pony to scavenge stable 123 (and in fact I remember somepony saying it had been picked clean already) so somepony else must have downloaded the password.

Unless it required a pipbuck, but even then. Somepony must have been up there before, but then how come there were no records? I hated mysteries.

"Whatever you say, Flare." I was too tired to argue. Sure I had slept for three days, but comas really don't count. I guess. If you could even call it a coma. Which I didn't.

We stopped in front of the door, and I finally got a good look at it. It was a simple little metal door with double bolt lock with a broken terminal beside it. With a creak Blackwater opened the door. "Here we are." On the other side was a staircase. "Go at least five floors up so we can see that password's power. Or else."

I heard the gentle whirl of my eye when I took my eye patch off and looked at Blackwater. There was a

purple box around her, the highest threat level my eye gave. I don't know how it knew, but I was not about to argue. We took a few steps through the door as the door shut behind us.

“So. Any thoughts?” I asked to break the eerie silence.

“Well.” The bug-like eyes on Flare's mask looked up. “We Could Go Up There.”

“I'm with the walking plan.” Serenity said. Turning, I gave her my best 'seriously' look. As if she ever walked anywhere. Using her powers of mind reading Serenity gave me a sheepish smile before sticking her tongue out at me. “I stick by what I said. Mush!” She kicked my flanks and I was off.

We ran, up and up and up. The stair lasted way too long, but I suppose it made sense, given it was in the middle of a mountain.

At the top was a small grey room. On the ceiling, hunks of what were once a turret hung lazily down on a mess of wire. Directly in front of us was a smashed in door with a terminal beside it, and an open doors to either side. I took a few steps forward and listened to the silence. Only it wasn't silent. There was a steady hum of lights above, and deep within the pristine facility I heard the rattling of machinery. There was also a whirring sound right above us. Looking up, I saw a small black ball above us.

“A camera,” Serenity said, standing her forelegs on the back of my head to get a better look. “It's watching us.”

Something red twitched on my EFS. The sound of mechanical maneuvering came closer, and when I peered out the main broken door in front of us I saw the hallway split into a crossroad. Judging by the EFS marking, it was just about to turn the corner and—.

“INTRUDER ALERT! MINOTAUR SYMPATHIZERS WILL BE DEALT DEATH!” A cone shaped robot rolled around the corner. At the top if the cone was a see through section with what looked like eyes on every side, making Serenity 'oooh' at it. However, when it started shooting gunks of green magical energy at us Serenity screamed and pointed hysterically at the nearby side door. I guess my password didn't mean dick to these robots.

“Right!” I said diving towards it, a few steps behind Flare. A flash of heat hit my hind leg, making me cringe in pain and wish for med-x. I slid through the door, Serenity in tow, and kicked it shut. “This sucks!” I groaned and looked back at my smoking leg.

I quickly scanned the room as Serenity hopped off my back. Two plain brown desks were lined up on either side of the room, and one had a working terminal. In the centre of the room was a small pile of pink dust with a rifle lying beside it. Somewhere I remembered that magical weapons sometimes reduced ponies into ash... like that. Well ain't that grand.

I pulled the spark pulse emitter from its pocket and pointed my metal hoof at my black-clad friends. “Flare. Grab that desk and barricade the door. Serenity.” The tiny filly grinned up at me, nearly jumping for joy that she had something to do other than be captured and wait for rescue. “See if that computer-y thing controls the robots.” Without another word, she jumped over to it, as Flare flapped his wings and buzzed to the desk.

I turned my head to read the EFS and found the robot was getting shockingly close. It's voice rang through the door, “DO NOT THINK TO HIDE FROM JUSTICE!”

“Do Not Think To Hide From My Cock!” Flare yelled as he slid the desk over. Obviously, I raised an eyebrow at him. “I Don't Think Well Under Pressure!” he said, punctuating with a grunt. That was a good enough reason for a bad joke, so I didn't pressure him, and instead positioned myself beside the barricaded door.

“Serenity, anything?” I asked, huddled down with the spark pulse emitter in my mouth. So far this

exploration was going wonderfully.

“Nothing but reports! Something about sending security guards to eastern tunnels because of a mass walk off. Talk of orbs, and stuff I don't understand.” That was hardly helpful. “Sorry, there ain't no nothing about deactivating robots.” She looked a little bit sad.

Something slammed into the door, making it shudder.

“Serenity, hide!” I screamed. The pink filly dutifully zipped behind the remaining desk and stayed there. Flare however was not so smart, and so stood near the door, his scorpion tail swinging back and forth. The door shuddered again and I crouched and watched as it screamed.

“DEFECTORS WILL BE BURNED!” There was a subtle whoosh and fire. The wooden door and desk became kindling. My heart leapt into my throat, and I ran backwards as the flames licked at me. A colt was running through the fire screaming. I watched him until the pyres shuddered and snapped and the cone shaped robot burst through, spraying globs of green. “TRAITORS WILL BE SHOT!”

The hulking beast of a robot seemed to target Flare and fired a volley of green bolts at him. The black armoured pegasus was having none of that. Say what you want about that pegasus, but, damn, he was agile (I'm sure High Stakes would agree [This is not the right time for that sort of thinking!]) and quick. I sat watching, dumbfounded, trying to regain my senses from the fire. Why did it always have to be fire?

“Dammit!” A green bolt clipped his wings. Shit, I should be helping. Standing up, I charged the robot. It ignored me. More bolts of green energy flew out at Flare. Something slammed into his helmet just as I jumped. Flare screamed. The full force of my body slammed into the cone shaped thing sending it tilting. There was a crash as it fell over, me on top of it.

“RESISTANCE IS FUTI—” I slammed the spark pulse emitter into what I figured was it's head. Electricity danced over its body as the thing writhed and shut down.

There was not time to celebrate my victory. I quickly dashed over to Flare who was struggling on the floor. So he was alive, but when I tried to stop him and looked at his mask I saw a blackened hole where his helmet's bug like eye was. “Flare are yo—.”

“Stupid, Broken-Ass Piece Of Shit!” He slammed his hooves to either side of his head and slowly removed his helmet with a hiss. Underneath Flare looked, well, perfectly fine. “You just can't talk in these things!” He threw the helmet into the inferno that was still raging. “I should have brought my quality armour, not this shit.” He looked up to me his pink eyes glimmering. “Way to take your time back there? Looking for some roast pegasus, huh?”

“I...” Shuffled my hooves a little. “The fire. I wasn't expecting...” It felt like my sight glazed over for a second before Flare patted me on the back.

“Yeah yeah, you and your trauma and regrets, I get it.” He smirked and trotted past me, over to Serenity (who at some point had come out of hiding and was perched on the fallen mechanical monster to strip it of its energy weapon and flamer) and looked past her to the fiery remains of the door and desk. “That didn't work at all. Any chance fighting this robot will be enough to please that bitch?” Hey, the password doesn't work on robots, have fun fighting them. Yeah, that'd work.

“I doubt it.” I said. “She'll want more. Search out a few floors for a way to turn them off at least. If she's not happy then...”

“We get toasted.” Flare laughed. “Well, I'll say this Hired, you always take me to the most interesting places. Perhaps we should get captured by tribals next, then be forced into an active volcano as a sacrifice. It'd be par the course.” That sounded likely actually. Caledonia seemed the sort of country to

have a random volcano just to torture me with. And now that I thought it, it was bound to happen. Because everything hated me.

“Or a plant monster. Captured by tribals. Sacrificed to plant-monster-goddess.” Might as well give the universe more options for my impending torture.

“Maybe there’s a giant mechanical god in this facility that wants to feed on our DNA and turn us into robots,” Serenity added, sticking her head out of the robot, her mouth full of wires. “That’d be so cool!” I facehoofed and shook my head at the filly. That would not be cool at all.

“Right.” I sighed. Now that our future entrapment was decided, I had more pressing issues on hand. “Anypony have a fire extinguisher?” I asked, looking at the flames blocking the only entrance.

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We did, in the end, find a fire extinguisher and extinguish our way out of the room. After picking up the rifle in the middle of the room (it had three shots), Serenity urged us to check out the room across the hall. We did and found one of the terminals locked out with the message: “Safe Bet Security Terminal Access Failed. Please Contact Your Supervisor.” The second had a list of ponies who were allowed special access. Most of the names were redacted. Which, by the way, was really bloody helpful.

So we left that room and walked up to the crossroads. Three different hallways leading three different ways, and I had to wonder whose idea it was to make the complex so confusing. If only I had a map. Oh wait. I stopped and lifted up my pipbuck. This thing was supposed to have maps and stuff.

As we stood there waiting, there was a whirring sound, and something slammed into the ground hard enough to shake the floor. That was a terrible sign. Looking behind us I saw the hallway we came through was suddenly blocked by a large steel wall. Which was not there a second ago. On it there was a sign that said 'If You Are Reading This A Code Yellow Warning Has Been Issued And All Exits Will Be Locked While Security Looks Into The Matter, It Will Be Cleared In 24 Hours, Or Until Security Gives The All Clear. Please Be Calm”

“That makes me calm,” Flare said, smirking at me. “What about you, Hired? Feel calm being trapped here?”

“Positively peaceful.” Trapped here for a day without any med-x. Maybe if I found a bathroom medical kit...

“Stop Where You Are!” We were already stopped so that didn't take much. “What Are You Doing Violating These Hallowed Halls?” the booming voice continued from what I assumed to be hidden speakers. Looking up, I saw another black bubble above us. I just loved being watched.

“Looking for treasure, and riches,” Flare nickered. “What're you doing?”

“Do Not Question Me! We Control This Facility!” the voice boomed. As if I really cared. I just made a mental note to inform Blackwater of the crazy pony. “Intruders Will Be Terminated!” Blips on my EFS started showing up. Quickly turning my head I saw two red dots on the left and one more on my right. None were in front of me (and obviously none behind), and I had to imagine the ones on either side were closing in.

“I don't have time for this.” My newly acquired rifled fired, and its bullet slammed into the black dome shattering it in a shower of sparks and shrapnel. “Let's go.” It was a waste of a bullet, but I was not in the mood to deal with megalomaniacs. The hallway zipped past us as I led my merry crew through the forward passageway where my EFS was reading nothing currently trying to kill me. I don't know what I would've without it.

Actually I did know, and the answer was get shot a lot and lose body parts.

The white hallways were unnerving, and the lights above were far too bright for me. It almost felt like they were boring into my skull. How could a place like this still have power? The walls, at least, were not entirely white (a beige off-white actually) and were at least interesting. Pre-war posters. You know stuff like, "If You See A Spy Report Him," accompanied with a picture of a Minotaur sneaking around with a bandit mask and a brief case. You know, classy stuff.

"Where are we going?" Flare asked.

"Forward," came my reply. To be honest, I didn't have any idea at all. This place was confusing, and without a map we could wander for hours. Not to mention the plethora of robots following us. Each time I looked up and saw a little black orb looking down at us I wanted to shoot it. However, my rifle only had two shots left and I couldn't waste them.

"Apt. I mean, we're supposed to explore five stories of this place to figure out what dangers your pipbuck can bypass, or access, or whatever. So far we have killer robots and insane ponies on the speakers out of our reach." Flare shook his head. "And that's on the first floor. The password has some effect apparently, but it ain't gonna give them a free ride, what else do they need to know?"

"We could go that way," Serenity said from my back. When I looked back I could see she was pointing at a glowing sign that said 'Cafeteria'. "Might be a floor plan there," Serenity explained. "Some of the pre-war buildings put maps in places like that so ponies knew where the exits were in case of fire." It was worth a shot, but from what I had seen this place had only one exit.

For half a second I wondered if maybe it did have another exit. A way out apart from the way we entered. If that was possible then maybe, just maybe, we could get out of Blackwater's grasp. She was a bitch, and I knew in my gut that when we came back she was going to kill us.

"Good thinking," I said to Serenity and followed the sign.

It was easier this way. It was better to run through the halls of an ancient facility than to think of what happened, of what I'd lost. Of how badly I'd failed my friends, and how I got them into this situation. Part of me wanted to blame High Stakes (and I did) but maybe if I'd listened to him. Or maybe... maybe if I had realized he wasn't trustworthy. If I had thought that maybe Smooth Tongue would try something. If I were a smarter pony. If I hadn't kicked Smooth Tongue out that window and started this whole mess. I had failed, utterly and completely. And running around let me forget it. If only for a moment.

My face still stung from where I had been shot. I had been lucky enough not to die, but I had been too afraid to look in a mirror and see how much it had messed me up. Another blemish, another scar. Like so many before, it was another mark of failure, another sign of my incompetence. Like my leg, and eye, and ear. My failures built up like the damage to my body.

It was too much. I had to think of something else. As we slowly traversed to facility towards the sign of 'cafeteria', I looked at the doors we passed and left un-scavenged. All of them seemed to be storage rooms, and were marked with that they held. One said 'terminals' while another was marked 'wiring', and a third stated, 'electronic handbooks and guides.' You'd think the guides would be first, but I figured I understood the reason. This place was made so ponies could rebuild, or at least that was the facade. So the first few floors would be for inspection, and above that was whatever the facility was really used for.

Megaspells.

At least if Flare could be trusted (so much had happened, and that was up in the air. I wanted to trust him, but sometimes it was difficult). Even still, the very thought of megaspells would leave any gang of Dise watering at the mouth. And they were going to the Steel Rangers. At least with Steel Rangers,

chances were they would just hoard the technology, instead if use it like most anypony else in Dise. So that was good. Unless somepony gave Blackwater the big red button.

So, what? I had to stop her from getting whatever tech was in this facility, but how? I was weak from being out for days and, you know, being shot in the face. Not to mention I may or may not have been addicted, and without med-x I wasn't really strong enough to take on the brunt of the Steel Rangers' forces. So I needed to stop her, and I needed a plan. I was terrible at plans.

"There!" Serenity pointed from my back. Never mind the fact it was hard to see somepony pointing while they were riding me, I still knew what she was pointing at. Above a set of double doors straight ahead of us was the word 'Cafeteria' in bright gold. I guess this was the place. So, I opened the door.

It wasn't a cafeteria -- I realized a second after opening the door -- it was was graveyard. The cafeteria had a mostly open second story, with stairs around the far walls leading to a balcony level, and the entire area was littered with tables and skeletons. There had to be at least a hundred in the large cafeteria, and nearly all were hunched over tables, their faces in food trays (the food must have rotted away), while others were flopped on the floor. It was like everypony had gone to sleep where they were, and then just died.

"Do You See Now You Can't Escape?" the voice boomed across the cafeteria. "You Have No Chance, Make Your Time."

"Didn't we tell the loud voice ta shut up already?" Serenity hopped off my back to glare at the nearest ceiling camera. "You're a butt!" she yelled at it. "If I had mah pistol I'd shoot ya." Good girl. Always shoot the loud voices from nowhere. It was the proper thing to do.

"Foals! Feel The Wrath Of My Protectitrons!"

"That's a stupid name!" Serenity countered. She made such a compelling argument I had to agree.

"Ack!" Looking up at the balcony I saw two of those rolling, cone-shaped robots. They were shooting at us. I pushed Serenity back with my leg and slid in front of her. A green bolt slammed into my chest.

"Fuck!" The front of my chest was on fire. A section of coat was burned off and it looked like it was melting. It hurt. Dammit, If only I'd had a med-x.

More bolts of green energy were falling towards us. Flare was the smart one and flipped a nearby table. I grabbed Serenity and dove for it. We huddled behind as green energy slammed into it. I could smell burning wood. "So, any plans?" I grunted, holding my chest with my good leg.

"Well.... We have how many shots in that rifle?" Flare said licking his lips. "Because unless you got a full mag and good aim I don't think those things are going down. We can't get close enough to spark'em." He chuckled. "Great, I'm going to be killed by giant, death-spewing dildos. What a way to go."

My metal leg hit his head lightly. "Not in front of Serenity. Also, are your jokes getting worse?" For one they didn't even look like dildos... not that I knew what those looked like. At all. "I have two shots. Take one out. If I have good aim." And even that didn't seem likely. It wasn't a particularly good rifle.

*...Is it bad?...*

I jolted upright and looked at my companions. Did they hear that too? Their faces looked contemplative. No... it was just me. A word on the wind. I did not like. I hated hearing voices. Closing my eyes I forced the words away. Just going insane. That's all. No big deal.

A burning sensation slammed into my back. Swearing, I pushed away from the sideways table to see a blackened hole where my back was resting. Note to self: tables make terrible cover. Enough of this shit. I had a rifle, time to use it. I reared up and planted my fore hooves in the table for stability. Mouth fired

rifle. I hated them, but I was a damn good shot. My first bullet cracked into the coned creatures clear top. The second shattered it in a flurry of electronics. Noticeably the green energy waves had been reduced to one at a time.

“One to go.” My chest burned, and my back was blackened by magical energy. I hated robots. Hate, hate, hated them. The table we were hiding behind wasn't fairing much better than me. One side was blackened, and now it had numerous holes penetrating it. This fight was going well.

“I have an idea.” All eyes turned to Serenity who was crouching low the ground. She didn't look afraid at all. I was so proud of her. “Those things have wheelies, not like hooves. So if we can, like, lure it over to the stairs, and it tries to go down'em.” They'd probably fall in a heap. Aha! That was genius! My daughter was a genius! I mean my... filly was. Oh, whatever. It made this fight much easier without turning into blackened bacon.

“Serenity, I love you.” I told her, earning a high pitched giggle. “But I need you to stay here.” She pouted but nodded. All right Silver. Time to use your totally existent leadership and battle-planning skills. I stood up briefly to get a look at the room but had to duck when a shot of green energy singed my mane. The closest staircase was to our right, and from the look of it, there were enough tables to form a makeshift path so we wouldn't get burned alive. “Flare, you're faster and better protected. Run past, overturn the tables.” They made shitty cover, but I couldn't really bring in better cover so they would have to make do. “I'll follow, and lure it over. If it doesn't bite, I'll charge.

“I like plans when you charge at fire-spewing mechanical monsters.” I pointed my hoof the direction he was to head. With half a chuckle, he zoomed off, flipping tables as he went. Luckily for me they all landed sideways, providing the most cover possible.

“Serenity.” I smiled down at her. “Be good and stay here, okay?” She gave me an unsure nod. It was the best I was going to get. Not wasting another second, I took off.

I had thought of diving from cover to cover, but decided against it. I needed to get from point A to point B as fast as possible. So I took off in a full gallop. The mechanical pain in the flank kept firing the whole time. Green blasts of energy zipped past me. One hit my flank, making me cry out but not slow down. Just had to keep running. I got to the end only a little worse for wear, and slid behind the table Flare had set up beside the staircase.

“Took you long enough.” Flare nickered. “Think I almost died of old age.”

“Your material is getting stale.” He just shrugged as I peeked around the edge of the table. Just like we had expected, the machine was rolling closer to the staircase. “I'm having doubts.”

“About this plan, or your direction in life?”

A green bolt flared towards my face, and I had to duck back behind cover as it left a shallow, blackened hole in the ground.

“Yes.”

Okay, deep breaths. Just needed it to wheel a bit further, then I would pop out and hope it was stupid enough to roll forward. Simple. Assuming the programmer was like me. That is, an idiot. “All right.” It rolled in front of the staircase to get a better shot. Good, exactly as planned. Now I just needed to run into the line of fire, and hope everything didn't suck. “Wish me luck.” Flare just gave me an over exaggerated salute and pushed me into the line of fire.

I stumbled out. There was a pause as I turned my head up at the robot. It, however, didn't pause at all and unleashed a torrent of green bolts at me. Shit, it wasn't rolling forward. Green blasts flared past me, too fast to dodge. Something hit my good leg, and I fell, smoking and stumbling. Bad, bad idea. It was

right there on the edge. Just a little further forward and it'd tip. I swear, if I found the pony that programmed that robot, I would stab them.

I struggled to my hooves, only to drop again when a green bolt slammed into my forehead. Pain raged through my body. I was going to die. Gunned down by a cone with wheels. I guess it was time for plan B.

Charge!

With my usual grace, I stopped caring and started running forward into the blasts. I tore the spark pulse emitter from my pocked mid-stride. Just had to get up the stairs and—. There was a flurry of pink behind the robot. A blast of green fired at the pink blur. Serenity screeched but kept running. She hit the robot, that was already teetering, with all her filly might. There was a slight pause as it thought about tipping over. It fell.

That part of the plan worked well. Rolling cones were not made for going down stairs and it started clanging and tumbling its way down. Right at me. Welp, this was going to suck. I tried to jump as high as I could as it rolled towards me. But I was running up stairs, and it was difficult! My heart soared as I managed to clear it with my forelegs. However, my hopes were dashed as it slammed into my back legs.

I staggered in midair. My forehooves flailed. Suddenly, I was falling head first. I stuck my metal hoof out. I felt it slam into the ground, sending the shock waves up my shoulder. Right after, my face hit home. There was a stabbing pain through my jaw, followed by a throbbing pain. The stair was cool on my face though, so I just laid there a minute. Closed my eyes and thought of home. Of Wildfire sleeping beside me, curled in my hooves. Of Foundation hiding behind my legs whenever she met somepony new.

“Hired. Hey Hired. Come in, Hired. Robots have been defeated. You can stop napping now.” I, what? My eyes shot open and I saw Flare hovering above me with a disapproving smile. “Oh, so you are awake. Thought the fall put you to bed. Again.” You know what this day needed? Another coma.

Just then I remembered the filly's scream. “Serenity!” I jumped to my hooves and pushed past the ponderous pegasus and up the stairs. Serenity was sitting on her haunches fussing over a nasty looking burn mark on her side. The wound looked to have burned the coat and scorched the skin, but I don't think it was a direct hit. Serenity didn't seem that concerned about it, but when she poked it, she winced.

“Did'ja see that, momma?!” Her grey eyes filled with excitement as she saw me come limping over. “I totally beat that thing up, it was so awesome. Stupid thing shot at me though,” she huffed, looking at her injured side. “Hey can I ge—.”

“No, you can not get a cybernetic replacement.” She tried her pouty look thing, but that wasn't going to work. “It's not bad enough for a replacement. A healing potion maybe, but that might be a waste.” There was a look of confusion on her face before she slowly realized I was joking with her. Apparently that was unheard of.

“Well I guess if you didn't get one for your face then ah can deal with my battle wound.” She looked down at her 'battle' wound with a proud smile. It wasn't the first time she had gotten hurt in one of my fights, but it was the first fight she got hurt in that wasn't emotionally upsetting after the fact. So I let her have that moment...

Wait. What about my face?

“What about my face?” I asked, scrunching up my muzzle. I mean, the whole thing was still slightly

sore for the whole being-shotgunned thing, but that was mostly gone due to the med-x.

Serenity blinked at me and gave a confused smile. “You... saw your face right?... Right? I mean --” She gulped a little and looked up worriedly at Flare when he came floating down. “Cause it's kinda...” She and Flare shared a concerned look and I felt my heart sink. I don't think I wanted to know.

“Figured Blackwater would want to taunt you a little with a mirror or something. Uh...” His pink eyes darted about, finding what looked like a cafeteria serving station on the wall (might I stop to point out how stupid it was to have the food on the second floor and the seating on the first) with a shiny metal sneeze guard. “Try that, might be reflective.”

Right. Just walk over there and look at myself in the mirror. How bad could that be? I mean, not like they were being really vague about it or anything. Or like I was shot. In the head. Just take a peek, couldn't hurt. Maybe if it was bad I could get face cybernetics like The Laughing Stallion.

*...Tell me... what is the nature of a hero?...*

Honestly, that question was beginning to drive me mad. Did it even matter? It was just some stupid riddle that was stuck in my head. Pushing it to the back of my mind, I stepped up and looked down at the reflective metal.

Well. That didn't look pleasant. The entire right side of my muzzle (and parts of my neck) was criss crossed with large pink scars that protruded from the surface of my face. Entire sections were missing and replaced with scar tissue. It was almost as if my face had been clawed apart and hastily put back together. The sight of it made my stomach turn. I wanted to take a step back, to look at anything else, but it was... fascinating, in a horrifying way.

“You got lucky, you know,” Flare said from behind me. “Way I heard it, you turned just in time. Any later and the blast would have taken off half your skull. There was some ricochet of course, but nothin' got into your brain pan. So you're lucky...” Lucky. I slowly moved my hoof up to touch the scars. “Some got in your eye too, but the right one... I wasn't there, but apparently it was nasty. Nearly lost you on account of blood loss, and had to stitch you together in short order. Apparently it wasn't easier. Swelling in the scars should go down in time, and it won't look so bad then...” Not look so bad. Yeah. But it looked bad. Like I'd gone five rounds with a Hellhound.

The scars ached and made me wince. It hurt, for some reason. My face had never been beautiful, or pretty, or anything like that, but seeing it like that wracked my gut. I'd lost an eye, an ear and a leg, what was half a face? Another mark, another blemish. Maybe this time I'd learn how to stop getting my stupid head in trouble. It was just... looking at my face was too much. It'd been such a long, frustrating day, and everything had gone wrong. I was weak and lost and betrayed by a pony I had thought I trusted. Part of me just wanted to just lie down and sleep. Let the world pass me by, it didn't need me. I never did anything for it but fuck up.

“Momma? Momma, are you crying?” Great, blubbering over facial scars. Some hero I turned out to be. “Momma?”

“It's nothing.” I wiped the tears from my eyes. It wasn't the scars that hurt, just what they represented. At least I was alive though. How many ponies got shot in the face and survived to be chased by robots days later? “Never mind, let's g—.”

“Do Not Think I Will Allow You To Escape That Easily!” the booming speaker voice cut me off. That was starting to get on my nerves. “Robo pony Robots Are Not Felled That Easily! They Are Equipped With Self Repair Talismans To Repair Critical, Yet Non-Destructive Damage!”

“What, exactly does that mean?” I asked. The green bolt that zipped by my ear a second later answered

that question. Turning around I saw the Protectitron that I'd shot in its 'head' whirl and start moving slowly towards us. "Oh, fuck that."

I'd had enough of robots. I'd had enough of being shot. And I'd had enough of this stupid, fucking facility. My hooves pumped me forward in a vicious charge. The thing was still right up against the guardrail that marked the end balcony, so when I hit it with my full force, we hit said rail. There was no pause or hesitation. One second, I charged into it so hard my shoulder throbbed, the next we were airborne.

My head slammed into the robot as we crashed into the ground. I felt blood trickle down my face and over my scars. That didn't matter. I sat up and pinned the Protectitron on its side with my massive weight. Not even bothering to take out my spark pulse emitter, I slammed my hoof down on the stupid thing. Then again, and again. I kept smashing it with my hoof until its side was torn asunder in metal and wires.

"Stupid." My hoof slammed into it again. "Fucking." My mouth clamped around some wires and I pulled back tearing them out. "Machine!" When I was done, I was standing over a pile of scrap metal and breathing in short raspy breaths. There, it was fucking destroyed. Could I just get this shit over with already?

"Hired..." Flare was beside me. When did he get there? "Are you okay?" No. No I really wasn't. It was just too much. Too fast. I needed to get out of this place. Part of me wanted to run and hide, go back to Dise. Live the rest of my life with Platinum Haze where things made sense. "Hired... you're creeping me out. Seriously..."

*...Just talk to me Silver! Let me in! I... I just want to help!...*

"I need a drink." I pushed past Flare and closed my eyes, ignoring the voices in my head. Just needed to get a drink and get my senses back. Everything would be alright.

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We couldn't find anything to sate my thirst, which was unfortunate. On the bright side, on the other side of the cafeteria bar, under the counter, there were cans of baked beans and a box of BUCKO cereal. Both with the label 'Guaranteed to last two hundred years, or your money back!'. Well, we ate it and didn't die of food poisoning, so I guess we wouldn't have to go to any corporate offices and demand our caps back. We didn't leave right away after eating though, as both Serenity and Flare seemed to think we had to rest. I didn't want to. Vainly, I hoped that maybe we could find a security office, open the entrance again, turn off the robots from there, and leave within a few hours. The longer they insisted we wait, the more I realized that just wasn't possible.

"Why are you fidgeting so much?" Flare raised an eyebrow at me.

"I'm not," I said as I tapped my forehooves on the table (we had to relieve it of its dead occupants) we were sitting at. "Just waiting." Tappity tap. Well, with my hooves, it was more like 'tappity smash', but it achieved the same effect. The facility was just getting to me. Not counting the long dead bodies, everything was too clean, too white, and the lights were too bright. Just. Getting into my headspace.

"You need to rest, Hired." Flare gave me a grim look. I disagreed, I had slept for three days, I needed to get moving. "You look like shit."

"Yeah, yeah, scars." I wanted to touch them, to feel the way they marred my skin, but it didn't matter. What was a scar? Just because I had nearly died, and got them from somepony I thought was a friend. It didn't matter. Just another scar.

"I mean, hell, you shouldn't even be here. After what you've been through, you should be resting, not

running around this shitty place.” Yeah, I agreed, but so what? We needed to keep going if we wanted to get out. “After everything that happened back at Bridle Hope... it's got to be eating up you up, I mean —.”

My metal hoof cracked into the table. “I'm fine, Flare.” Fine. So what if the Crimson Hoof had taken over the town I tried to save? Who cared that I'd been betrayed and shot in the face? Not me. I was only being stupidly vain because of the scars. It didn't matter, we just needed to move on. The light was just giving me a headache. “Just have to beat them back later.”

“Momma are yo—.”

“Fine.” I stood up abruptly. Sitting there for a second longer would have driven me insane. “Just fine.” My cybernetic eye scanned the area. We were back on the bottom floor, and I remembered there being a door with a terminal up on the second floor balcony beside the serving area. It wasn't much, but it'd get us one floor up. Only had to go up five floors to make Blackwater happy. Then I could go back to Dise and sleep for a year.

They followed me when they saw where I was going. Good, I really didn't want to go on without them. They exchanged worried whispers though. I'm not sure why. I had been through worse. Nearly lost them both with my eye after Karkhoof. This was easy compared to that. So long as I kept moving and didn't dwell.

The door was just off to the right of the serving area, right beside an entrance to the kitchens. Part of me wanted to go scavenge in there for melee weapons, but at that range my hooves or the spark pulse emitter would do far more damage. So what was the point? Instead, I walked up to the terminal hanging on the wall.

*//Input password//*

Oh, that was easy. I help up my pipbuck-ed leg and looked down at it to see it was still on the same screen that Blackwater left it on back on the main level of the centre. All it took was a press and it started glowing and screeching and making my shoulder sting again. Just like before.

*//Magical Input Recognized//*

*//Analyzing...//*

*//Password Accepted//*

With that the metal door slid open, opening a new hallway to us. That was... convenient. I suppose having the master key to the whole facility wasn't really a bad thing.

“Must have been annoying putting in the password every time you wanted to get something to eat.” Flare said as we walked through the door. It was a good point, at least until I saw an old boot by the door with strange markings on it. It took me a few seconds to realize it was probably used to prop the door open to avoid the password every time. Because who cares about security?

“Do you know where we're going, Hired?”

Forward. Because if we kept going forward maybe we would get to where we needed to go. Not that I knew where we were going. “Uh.” I looked around the hallway. Dull and white. I was beginning to think it was designed to drive ponies insane. “No.”

“Oh good.” Flare seemed pleased. “For a second there I thought you finally had a clue.”

I didn't respond except to look over and give him a glare. Dealing with him was just hurting my head, more than it already hurt. We walked for a while in near-silence (except for the humming of lights). Serenity had tried to jump on my back, but quickly jumped back off once she saw the rather large laser wound that might as well have been still smoking.

Twice the “great” voice on the speakers yelled at us, but we ignored him. It was nothing important, just more 'You know not what you do!' and 'Continue at your peril'. The usual shit nopony cared about.

Unlike all the rooms on the first floor, the ones we passed all seemed to be a series of offices. We didn't really explore that much into them as all the terminals were locked, and it'd take too much work to use my pipbuck on them all for little information they might hold. The offices were all really creepy, too, because each and every one had skeletons still sitting at their desks. Unmoved for centuries.

Even stranger was that as we walked through the halls, I noticed a skeleton lying on the floor clutching a mop. A bucket was beside it (empty). It was as if he just dropped dead in the middle of mopping. Even with radiation, death takes a while, so why not here?

“Turn right,” Serenity said abruptly. We were at yet another crossroads in the facility. “I said right, c'mon.”

“Why?” I asked shortly. Every direction looked the same to me, except for the signs on the doors.

“Cause I stole the map from the cafeteria, and it says this way is the security offices.” Looking down, she did have a map floating out in front of her. I felt her magic before, but just assumed she was carrying Scootaborg. Of course... she never did get her back after she threw her at that pony in Bridle Hope. “There we might find a place to unlock the front door, or turn them robots off or something.” That was a good point. She sure was resourceful.

“Well, lets go.” I offered her a weak smile. Guilt was starting to rise up from the way I had been acting. I did want to apologize for being quiet and broody, but I couldn't think of the words, so I kept walking.

---

The security offices came up surprisingly fast and with very little fanfare. In that there was a huge sign, a metal cage-like wall, and a locking door just to get into the wing. Of course, locked doors did not trouble me much at all. One buck later and we were inside the wing, looking around. The first thing I noticed was that there were no security cameras. I guess nopony watched the security ponies.

“Whaddya think's in here?” Serenity asked as she trotted over the nearest door. A simple wooden door that said 'Internal and External Information And Analysis Center.' My guess was information. So I opened the door without another word.

Inside was a shockingly small room with a single desk with a skeleton face down on a broken terminal for decoration. Another pony that just happened to drop dead where it was sitting. You'd think the entire place had been poisoned from the number of casual corpses we found. Two doors flanked either side of the desk. One read 'Observation Chamber' and the other, 'Exterior Information Gathering.'

“Now.” Flare walked over and tapped the second door. “I've never been here before, nor have I ever worked security, but to me, that's a fancy way of saying spying.” Oh, I guess that was a good point. “So I say we start here.” Sure, what could possibly go wrong?

The long skinny room felt a little bit cramped. Two rows of desks lined either wall and they all glowed green with monitors. Most distressing was at the end of the room was three clear pods with three deactivated Protectitrons. I didn't want to be anywhere near those things, but it seemed my companions didn't care and trotted in anyway.

“So.” I walked into the centre of the room. “Looking for door controls. Or floor plans. Details of

security systems. Something to appease Blackwater.

*... Please... Show me what you found...*

“Fuck off, Smooth Tongue!” Before I finished saying it, I realized I had just yelled at a voice in my head. Not going crazy at all. By the looks my friends gave me, I don't think they believed that. “Uh, I mean, then we can get out of here and fuck over Smooth Tongue.” They didn't seem to believe me at all. “Just... go do those things. With the terminals.” They kept staring. “Just do it!”

Serenity huffed a little and ran over to the nearest terminal, while Flare just laughed. He did go do as I asked once I glared at him though. If there was one thing to say for hideous facial scars, they sure put the scare in ponies. I suppose I could have helped out with the computer hacking but... uh. I was bad with technology. Even at my best I could only sometimes get my pipbuck light to work properly. I didn't really want to risk anything.

So, instead, I sat in the middle of the chamber (the floor was really cold) and stared off into space. This place made it hard for me to think right. For some reason, I kept picturing High Stakes lying bloody and beaten at my hooves. It was such a sweet day dream too. I could almost hear his pleas for mercy. Smell his blood pooling around him. It was exciting. I could hardly wait until we met again, so I could teach him not to leave a job half done.

“Hired.” Huh. “Yo, Hired. Damn, you've been spacing out a lot.” Flare wasn't turned to me, but he was waving me over with his wing. “This thing needs a password to get into some deep files. Try your magical pipbuck!” Right. Slowly I rose back to my hooves and trotted over the glowing green screen. My pipbuck was still on the 'super-password' part of the menu so I just pressed activate.

With a flash of lights and the burning of my shoulder, the screen flickered and Flare laughed in victory. With a furious series of taps his pink eyes started scanning, a subtle green glow illuminating his face.

“Anything interesting?” I asked.

“Reports and reports, some crazy shit.” He seemed at least mildly amused. “Whoever was running this facility had spies all over the place.” He tapped the screen. “Reports from ponies placed in the Equestrian Ministry of Morale, Ministry of Image, Stable-Tec itself! Something called the 'OIA' as well, but I'm not sure what that even means.” So?

“Pre-war shit,” I growled. “Who cares?”

“Well. You got somepony making a lot of enemies, means they might design their security to counter these enemies. Get it? Could be useful stuff.” Right. I'm not sure if that made any sense or if Flare was just justifying his curiosity. Chances are it was a little bit of both. “Or even better, look!”

On the grainy green screen was a crudely drawn map. Flare hit a few buttons and the map shifted and rotated rising to another floor. A few more clicks and it moved fast sideways and turned into a map of a large factory. “See the legend in the corner?” Flare said. Sure enough in the corner there was some words written. “Tells me what to type to see what I want to see. Think it comes on every terminal in this place so folk don't get lost.” That would have been useful hours ago. “But look. This place has entire sections for weapons manufacturing. Living quarters spread out across the facility. Hell, we've only been through the administration offices. Look at all this!” Flare's eyes were wide as he scrolled through the map. “It's just. Shit. I knew it was large 'cause I was stationed in a base at the top, but this is insane! It was like a city!”

It was... Rather impressive. As he scrolled, newer and newer areas just kept opening up. “How did Wallkirk pay for this?”

“He didn’t.” Flare flicked a few more things bringing up a list. “Look here, the Caledonian military paid for the bunker in case of war, and Stable-Tec paid to have supplies saved for stable 123. Wallkirk owned the mountain, and combined the two to create... whatever the hell this place is.” Flare looked deadly serious. “If the Steel Rangers got complete control of this facility...”

...Then the wasteland would instantly have a new superpower. Even if there weren’t any megaspells here. So we were about to hand the most dangerous fuckers in the wasteland a small city whose entire purpose was manufacturing weapons and storing technology. Fucking lovely. The only thing I could think to do was try and delete the password from my pipbuck. If I could do that, then maybe Blackwater wouldn’t be able to get to the more dangerous areas. Some NCA pony mentioned to me once that the robots made scavenging impossible, though I imagine the door also had something to do with that.

“Momma... you might wanna see this,” Serenity said from her terminal across the room.

“Already seen the map,” I said, still watching the map.

“It’s about the password.” I turned and ran down to where she was. “Read this.” She pointed at her terminal.

*“Listen Grinder. I understand you have some trepidations against the magical master key, but understand, it’s only for extreme circumstances. What is the likelihood of the world ending anytime soon? Besides, the Stable is only programmed to give out the password five times before it deletes itself. And only onto a pipbuck, and they aren’t exactly commonplace. And even if they were, if the pony wearing it gets killed or their pipbuck ripped off, the password deletes itself. Sure, once it’s on the pipbuck it can be copied but only once, and the copied password can’t be moved or copied itself. No pony is ever going to use it anyway because we’re going to win the war, so stop worrying. See? This is not something we put on without proper precautions.”*

“See, I’m thinking that’s why them Steel Rangers kept you alive. They must have found out the way it works and kept you alive so you could transfer it to Blackwater here, ya know?” So she already had a copy of the password and was just fucking with me.

“Great.” There went my plan of deleting the password. Now I had to fucking kill her. Well, assuming I got out alive. Wiping some sweat from my brow, I looked over the email again. “Why did she send us here again?”

“Well,” Flare said from across the room, “to find out the security and tell her what to expect. Though, given what we know, I’m going to bet she knew the security systems and sent us here to kill as many robots as we can before we die. Then she’ll probably grab the tapes of it after she cleans the place out to laugh. Don’t you love it when ponies fuck with us?”

“It’s great.” I groaned.

“Oh, shit.” Huh. My head snapped to Flare who was frantically pressing at buttons as his screen flashed red. “Shitshitshit. That’s not good. It locked me out and it might be starting up th—”

A flash of green energy sped past my face. Serenity started to scream. I pushed her behind me. When I turned, three cone-shaped robots were rolling towards me. Lowering myself, I felt my knees shake. Dammit, I felt so weak. These things were going to roll right through me. Having no other choice, I quickly flanked right, crouched under the nearest desk, and threw it across the skinny room. That should hold them.

As soon as the desk shifted into their path there was a burst of fire. Flames licked at me, and I could smell pieces of mane singing. Fire. Why did it always have to be fire? I took a shaky step back, unable

to look away from the flames.

*...They say time heals all wounds... but it doesn't fix scars...*

Out of the flames of the desk I saw something. At first I didn't believe it, but I know what I saw. From the burning desk a small colt with a hole in it's leg was crawling out. His mane was flames, but he had the brightest blue eyes. When our eyes met, I reached out a hoof to him. I had to pull him out. To save him. I couldn't kill him again. Just a little closer and I could pull him out. It was so simple.

“Hired, you idiot.” Something tugged on my tail. “We run *away* from fire, not towards it.” Looking back, I saw a blue pegasus tugging at my tail. Flare. Right. How could I forget? “C'mon!” I blinked and turned back to Post Haste... to find him missing. Tears stung my eyes. I was so close. Why did Flare stop me?

“Momma, you're scaring me.”

I shook my head, dislodged the tears, threw Serenity onto my back, and ran the fuck out of that room. Post Haste was dead, but Serenity was alive. Had to keep moving or this place would kill us or drive us crazy. Maybe both. This whole place reminded me of something I couldn't place my hoof on. Whatever, keep running.

Flare slammed the door behind us. Without waiting for Serenity to jump off my back, I ran to one side of the desk in that room and pushed it until it was directly in front of the door, blocking it. It wouldn't hold them for long, but it'd buy us some time.

“This way.” Serenity pointed at the door marked 'Observation Room.' Well, it was as good a choice as any. If we hid near the door we could jump them one by one... hopefully.

We quickly scurried into the room as a robotic voice boomed. “OBSTRUCTION DETECTED! PROBABILITY OF MISSION HINDRANCE: ZERO PERCENT!”

Closing the door, I checked to make sure Serenity was all right before looking around.

It was a large room with a series of semi-circular tables (with many terminals) all arched around the far wall. A wall, I should mention, that was covered from floor to ceiling in monitors. On each monitor was a rotating view of hall ways, factories, and... what the hell was that room? In the centre of the monitors was one three times as large as any other. There was something about it that was enchanting, and it seems Flare and Serenity thought so as well as we all moved closer to get a better look. Even with the threat of death by vaporization I had to see.

The large room in the screen seemed to be in a strange shape, with sixteen different walls, each the same length, making it a strange shape (I could only see half the room, so I guessed). On each of the walls, I could see a number painted, encircled with strange runes. The floor was covered in a mosaic of a white so pure it made the rest of the facility look dirty, and in a pattern so strange and arcane I couldn't make head or tail of it. In the centre of the chamber there was a empty space without tiles, dyed a deep blue. It was just large enough for a pony.

“What the shit?!” Flare gasped.

A pony that wasn't there before appeared. It was pure white like the tiles, and lacking a mane or tail. Something about the pony made my shoulder ache.

The pony flickered.

One second it was lying down. The next it was standing, its back to the camera.

“Is that really... there?” Serenity asked in a hushed tone, as if she was afraid the thing could hear us

through the screen. But how could it?

There was a rush of wind. Something creaked.

The pony's head turned all the way around. It stared into my soul with pits of fire for eyes.

Level Up!:

No New Perks Or Stat Milestones. Lamé.

((A/N: This chapter is later, and I do apologize, but sometimes making these things readable takes effort. Ask Menti, Julep, and theBSDude, the humble editors who are awesome and stuff. As well I must thank Kkat for allowing me to mess around in her world.))

((Tired of waiting between chapters? Try these stories: [Murky Number 7](#), [Morality of Property](#), [Homecoming](#), And [Best Served Cold](#). ))

## Chapter 19: Virtues And Vices

*“A world at peace. There had to be sacrifice.”*

“Mom, is it safe?” Foundation's ruby eyes looked wary at best.

“Of course, sweetie.” I stretched out my forelegs. “Just a spar. Keeps me big and strong.” Big and strong and unbeatable.

Twice a year in Marefort, the guard ponies would gather for a series of competitions. There was marksmanship (Nos won the last five years), races (Wildfire won this one, actually), and of course sparring. It was mostly to make sure all the guard ponies were ready in the event of an attack, but also became a bit of an event for all of Marefort. They liked to call it the 'Iron Pony Competition' and place bets on who would win. Apparently the bet was twenty to one that I would beat Star Belle in the final bout.

I could see why. The golden pony with a dark amethyst mane wasn't good at sparring, but she was much smaller than I. She won her previous bouts by ducking and dodging and wearing her opponent out. From the look in her eyes she knew that wouldn't work for me. My muscles weren't for show, and I did not tire easily. To beat me, she was going to have to fight me at full strength, and that just wasn't possible.

“I mean for her.” She scrunched up her muzzle. I really didn't want her to be worried. It was a miracle we had even been able to convince her to come. She was afraid of crowds, and most of Marefort was surrounding a small circle in the dirt. Sure, she was half hidden under Wildfire's legs, but it was a start. She looked up at me, “You're big...”

With a smile, I ruffled her mane which made her squeak and try to hide behind it. “I won't hurt her, I promise.” She bit her lip and looked away. Which is what she did whenever she was unsure. “Trust me. I didn't hurt the others, did I?” She shook her head. “Exactly. Just stay with Mommy.” She nodded and gave me a weak smile. I was so proud of her coming out here with us. It was a big step. I gave her a quick kiss on the top of the head, then took a step back and turned towards my opponent.

This was going to be almost too easy. Of course, it always was for me. The rules were simple. Kicking was not allowed, what you had to do was wrestle the pony until they were flat on their back for three seconds. It was simple, and could be brutal. I was just so much stronger than everypony else it was never much of a challenge.

“You ready to lose, big girl?” The small mare across the ring from me stretched. “Time to bring you down.”

I stared blankly at her. No words were needed. There was a bell rung, and ponies started cheering. I pushed them out of my mind though. Before me they became grey shapeless figures. The only thing that mattered was my opponent. This was the way life should be. Straightforward.

She charged at me. I was not expecting that. Quickly I strafed right and she passed by. She turned quickly, and smirked. Just a test. We circled each other around the ring. Just to get a feel for each other. Maybe I underestimated her ability. Or something.

The pony dived for my leg. I didn't even bother to move. She just clamped her legs around it, and tried to tug me over. I didn't budge. At all. Instead, I lifted my leg out forward with her still attached. With a

raised eyebrow I shook her slightly. She gave a weak smile back as if realizing and accepting how badly thought out her plan was. "Are you done?" I shook her hard, but she clung on. I think somewhere in the mass of ponies I heard laughter, but I pushed it out of my head.

"Not yet." Faster than I could follow she climbed up my leg and snapped her hind legs around my neck. There was a sudden sharp pressure around my throat. "C'mon." Damn, her thighs were made of iron. Black spots flared in my vision. Oh. That couldn't be good. Dimly, I heard somepony say, "Timber!"

My eyes snapped open. Crap, I was on the ground. That was never good, 'specially not in a wrestling match where the point was to put the other pony on their ass. Something was pushing against my chest. Star Belle. She was ramming me with her head to try and get me to turn over. This really wasn't a fair match. I mean, she couldn't even move me.

"Fuck, you're heavy," Star Belle grunted.

"Yeah." I grabbed her neck in my fetlocks, and rolled. She flipped over me and slammed hard into her back. She tried, but I was over twice her size. It would have taken a miracle for her to take me down for good. Three seconds later, the match was over. It really wasn't much of a challenge for me.

Before I could get back to all fours, I felt a small body slam into me. Knowing immediately who it was, I rolled over and fell on my back with an over exaggerated 'oof'. Serenity climbed onto my chest, giggling pleasantly.

"You were teasing her, weren't'cha? I knew it, ya just pretended to be downed." Yeah, that was it. She didn't have thighs of iron or anything. It was all an elaborate act to mess with my daughter.

"Yeah." I reached my metal leg up to ruffle her yellow mane. Huh... had it always been metal? Part of me said yes, but looking around at Marefort it just felt... wrong. I couldn't put my hoof on it. "Totally let her get me down. Makes the victory sweeter."

"You should teach me!" she said, jumping up and down on my chest. "It'd be so cool!" She blinked for a second before gaining a wicked grin, "Oh, if I'd something to make me strong, I bet I'd be unstoppable, can I, Mom? Just new legs, cause mine are boring."

"Serenity." She stopped hopping to smile at me. "Really, now." The pink unicorn pouted and hopped off my chest. "Go to your momma, and don't ask her about them either. You know she'll just say no, and you know how I don't like you going behind my back." She giggled and ran off to ask her mother. Because who ever listens to the giant mare.

With a sigh, I rolled onto my hooves and cracked my neck. She'd really done a number on me. "Here." I stretched out my left hoof to Star Belle. The golden pony took it happily and helped herself up. "You nearly got me."

She laughed and wiped back her mane. "I nearly did, but, damn, you're heavy. How did you get so bucking huge?" Her eyes were wide as she looked up at me. I had to chuckle just a little bit. "I mean, seriously."

"Born this way. And exercise." She laughed a bit at that. It wasn't really a joke. I was always big for my age, and after momma died and my brother got taken away I'd had to fend for myself. This meant I needed to take the more labour-intensive jobs earlier than most ponies because you got more rations that way. Of course as a filly I wasn't strong enough, so I had to spend a lot of my free time resting, or exercising so I could keep up. Eventually I got stronger and stronger, and after that I just didn't stop exercising. It became routine and I became a walking tank.

"I should try that," she chuckled, rubbing the back of her neck. "Next time, I'll beat ya, so you best

watch out!” She laughed and galloped off. I watched her for a minute before turning back to my 'family'. It wasn't a real family, but this was the wasteland and it was close enough.

Foundation was carefully navigating from underneath Wildfire. Now it wasn't like my red mare was large, but Foundation had always been a bit on the runty side ever since we found her. Maybe that was how she was able to survive the raider attack that killed the rest of her village. Either way, she was always careful to be close to someone she trusted, or hidden enough the other ponies couldn't see her. If she agreed to go into a crowd, she always hid under either me or Fire.

Quickly trotting over, I was surprise-attacked by Wildfire, giving me a kiss on the cheek. Foundation made an 'eww' noise and I copied it. “Ugh, Wildfire, in public? Ponies might get the wrong idea.”

“Or the right one, hon.” Ah this old argument. We both knew the steps and could dance the dance without flaw. I for one, was too tired from getting choked to respond. We shared sly smiles and nothing more was said about the matter. “So, when do we get our prizes? I heard there were carrot cakes involved. You know how Foundy loves carrot cakes.”

The little filly below her nodded adamantly until I looked down at her. She gave a weak smile, nodded once more, and tried to hide behind her mane. It was long and unruly, but it didn't work that well. “Y-yeah. They're the best.”

“And you get two whole ones! How exciting.” Cake was something you got once a month, and never a whole one. I never much cared for sweets, so I always gave my share to Foundation. Wildfire did as well, though she liked to steal bites. Never big ones, just enough for Foundation to catch her and playfully scold. Wildfire said it was supposed to be teaching lessons of honesty, but I think it was just a silly game so she could get a bite of cake. They both enjoyed it though.

“It's very... I like cake...,” she paused for a second as we moved closer to the Marefort housing warehouse. “Two *whole* cakes. All for me?” Her ruby eyes were wide in wonder. That was a lot of sweets, and I'm sure if she were the type, they would have gotten her all types of hyper.

“Well,” I smirked as we neared the entrance, “not all at once, of course.” She made a soft 'awwwwwing' sound as I saw a golden maned pony stop to wave at me, before trotting my way. “You two go ahead, I'll see what Marigold wants.”

Wildfire gave me another kiss (to see me squirm in front of Marigold) and trotted off with a giggle. Marigold snickered. “Pretty mare, good thing she's not taken.” My glare apparently told her to change the subject fast. Not before laughing at me though. Ponies were forever laughing at me. “Right right, I got it, Hired. No need for your stink eye.” Shouldn't that be stink eyes?

“What is it, Mari?” I asked with an exaggerated sigh.

“Your cake, of course.” She chuckled softly. “You put up quite a show; next time we might have to offer the prize to anypony who can last a minute with you. Damn those muscles of yours.” Yeah yeah, I've heard it before. “And Wildfire winning the race, now that came as a shock. Hell, next time we should have a mechanics competition so your filly gets a prize too, eh?” Yeah, she'd like that. More cake for her.

“Thanks. I think.” I tried my best to smile as I tapped my metal leg against my pipbuck.

“Hah, you always sucked at taking compliments, didn't ya.” She bent back to grab something from her saddle bags and throw them at me. I was quite deft, so I managed to catch them in my saddle bags.

“There, cakes. You earned them. Tell Fire I need her in two hours, can ya?”

“Yeah, no problem.” There was an awkward second where I wasn't sure if I should have walked off or not, but since when did I care about courtesy? Wildfire had already entered the Marefort, and was

halfway up the ramp to the second level by the time I caught up.

Marefort was its usual self, that being busy and full of din. Serenity absolutely loved it though. She said the place reminded her of what would happen if a town got cybernetics. I didn't really understand the reference, but always nodded along when she said it anyway. When I caught up to them Serenity was literally bouncing on Wildfire's back.

“So, cake? Cake? Cake?” She grinned at me. When I didn't respond right away she started to frown. “You did get the cake right?” She licked her lips, “I'm in love with cake 'cause it is delicious. Top three favourite candy of all time. No! Top two, I've decided this.”

“Why not top one?” Was the obvious question as I trotted up beside the pair.

With a heavy sigh she just shook her head at me, “You need'a leave room for other foods to grow. Give them an opportunity to succeed, so the top spot is always empty.” I was not entirely sure that made any sense at all. But hey, whatever works for her. I wasn't about to argue.

The thing about Marefort is that if you're fearless, getting down from the top is quick, but no matter what, getting back up is a pain in the flank. To get to our house in particular, there were three ramps to climb and two bridges to cross. So if you lived in Marefort, you had to be strong because you'd be walking up and down them everyday. Some of the ramps were stupidly steep, too. Sometimes it felt like a chore to get home without being cut by poorly designed buildings, or getting a hoof caught somewhere, or falling.

This time however there was one casualty. That being a long scratch in my left leg that bled slightly. It wasn't really enough to worry about, though when we reached our house Foundation crawled out from under Wildfire and winced at the blood. I just had to dab it with a healing potion to show her it was nothing. She really didn't like the sight of blood. Nudging her inside the house with the promise of cake I looked around to see if the coast was clear.

Wildfire didn't wait for my check before leaning down to kiss me. It was just long enough to leave me satisfied, and have me begging for more. She was a talented mare like that. “Something something, 'I'm not a fillyfooler' right, hon?”

With a heavy blush I nodded. “Yeah, yeah.” With a kick at the floor I said. “Marigold said she needed to talk to you. Didn't say what about. Guess you should go.” She gave me another quick peck.

“You look so sad about it, too. Ya know how I hate it when those pretty eyes go all mopey.” I wasn't moping. That'd be dumb. “Make sure she doesn't eat too much cake. You know how she gets. She'll like it better spread out in the long run. I won't be long hon.” With that she turned and sauntered off, her tail rising suspiciously high. After staring for a minute (can you blame me?) I turned and went back inside our house.

It really never changed much. Two beds, a table, and very little space. Serenity was already bouncing happily on the bed in anticipation. Considering her excitement, I decided on ‘quickly’ instead of spread out and placed the cakes on the centre table. My eye patch was itching so I took it off as well. “You ready for cake?”

Foundation nodded. She didn't say yes, but I could see in her eyes how much she wanted it. It was her favourite type of cake after all... huh. I just stood there looking at my filly for a minute. Something felt...

“Argh.” My right eye stung. Something must have fallen into it. My right eye... right.

“Momma, what's wrong?” Nothing. Nothing at all. I looked away from her and to my table to see the eye patch was gone. But it was just there. Just a minute ago. “Momma?” Serenity said. I would

recognize that voice anywhere. But Foundation was there...

I backed up. The table fell, spilling its contents on the floor. A round cake rolled across the floor before resting at my metal leg. Something was wrong. Something was. Looking over, Foundation's ruby red eyes seemed panicked. Or were those my eyes? Something was just...

I screamed.

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Light filtered into my vision like liquid fire. I kept screaming. The light swam through my skull, setting it on fire, until all I felt was fire. Never before had I ever seen something so bright. Dammit. I slammed my head down and hit something hard. There was no pain though. Everything already hurt way too much for there to be any pain. It was just a sense of pressure and nothing but the fire in my skull. For a second I thought someone set me on fire. That I was going to die. It would have been appropriate.

And just like that, the fire left and I was left in darkness. I felt a chill wind blow over my eyes and shuddered at the sensation. Slowly my eyes opened, but still there was only darkness on all sides. My gut twisted. What happened? I was in Marefort. There was an Iron Pony Competition, and then everything went wrong. So very wrong.

I sat up slowly. My metal hoof clinked off the floor. Metal, it must have been. I reached my hoof over to my pipbuck and clicked on the light. There was a deafening second before the light finally clicked on and bathed my world in a dark amber light.

The room was small. Smaller than I was expecting, barely enough room to turn around. The walls were a dark and dusty grey (I believe, amber is not a good light colour for judging things like that) with a liberal amount of cracks crawling up them. More distressing me was the fact that one wall was less of a wall, and more of a series of impenetrable iron bars. Apparently I was in a cell. Which was great, except it wasn't.

There were noises from beyond my walled barrier, and a gasp of pain. Apparently somepony had been in the dark so long even my meagre light hurt their eyes. The voice wasn't one I recognized, so I hoped maybe they'd be able to tell me something. After getting to my hooves, I peered through the gloomy bars. Sure enough, there was another cell across from me, and inside it, a cowering pony.

"W-who are you?" Good question. I was about to ask the same thing myself. The pony was an almost pure white unicorn with a yellow mane that hung in clumps, as if it hadn't been washed or brushed in weeks. His cheeks were gaunt and hollow, and his eyes were sunken and looked lifeless. On his flank was a picture of an open book with a series of numbers underneath, but it was scratched and bleeding as if he had been trying to remove it. He was alive, but had he not spoken, I wouldn't have known it.

"Uh, Wildfire." I don't know why I lied, or why of all the names I could have chosen I had to pick that one. "Where are we?" The pony looked so scared that I did my best to keep my voice calm, despite the itching in my mind telling me how wrong all of this was.

"You don't know..." It wasn't a question. "It's... where I'm not sure. This place is hell... yes, that's it." His eyelid twitched. "Caledonia military... thing." Not *New Caledonian Alliance*. It had to be before the war... there was a sinking feeling in my gut. "Ponies in uniforms, some with stars. It has to be... I'm sorry."

"For what?" I tried to press myself up against the bars so I could look down the hall. As soon as my cheek touched metal a bolt of electricity slammed into me. Next thing I knew I was sitting on my ass, my eyes spinning. "Woah..."

"Sorry," he repeated, his eyes downcast. "There is no escape... none. You'll die here..." Oh good.

“Others have. Better. They're... experimenting. Trying to... I don't know. I can't know. If I know they'll kill me. Anything to beat the minotaurs, right?” I nodded dumbly. Part of me wanted to explain that the war ended and everypony died, but he didn't seem in the mood. “I-I was bad so...”

“So, what?”

“I wasn't bad!” His eyes went wide. “I wasn't! I... I was a psychologist. I-I helped ponies. G-got to the root of their issues. Gave comfort.” He peered at me. “You need comfort. You'd *need* me but... I... I was bad. There was a conference and...” His eyes glazed over and his tone went from nervous to dead. Just... dead. “I was invited to discuss wartime stress disorder and how to fix the soldiers so they can go back to fighting. I said maybe they shouldn't be back fighting so soon. I said if we just ended the war, told Equestria we're not fighting their proxy war, that we should quit.” His voice started shaking again. “They took m-me the next day, do'ya see? I said we should end the war! I was bad and...”

“And they couldn't let that stand.” Right. I was getting a clear sense of pre-war sentiments. “What happened?” The story must have been important. Otherwise why was I here. How I got here could wait.

“And I was taken... to the Snake Bite labour camp. So much work, b-but wasn't so bad. Not so bad... until I was... chosen.” His head moved back towards his flank. In the dim light I saw the numbers under his cutie-mark again. “My number. Five-Six-Eight-Nine-Four-Seven-Seven. You have to remember. Five for the years in college. Six siblings. Eight times a patient committed suicide. Nine weddings patients invited me too. Four children. Seven times they whipped me when I forgot. Seven days before I could feel again.” He looked up at me. “You have to know your number.” He paused. “I forgot. Not what brought me here. I was chosen. There was a lottery. They said... they said I'd won and I'd get to go home.” He sobbed. There were no tears though. He must have used them all up so very long ago. “They lied.”

“They brought you here instead.” Wherever here was... when I found out I vowed to destroy this place. Tear it to the ground with my teeth if I had to. I knew nothing yet, except how much I hated this place. Hated what it did to him... I don't know what it did, but just looking at him made my heart sink.

“Yes... here. I never saw but it's so... white. I hate it they... do things. Needles and tests and... the others died, I didn't... I'm stronger. You're new, you'll die.” He started shaking. “Die screaming like rest, but it's for a good cause. For the war. We shouldn't end the war. We need to win. No... no matter what.”

Far down the hall there was a click. A rush of cold wind followed. Then hoof steps. They fell heavy and hard. The sound reverberated down the hall and into the darkness. I could almost feel the ground shake at each hoof fall. The pony heard it to. From the look on his face it was the sound of death itself.

“Tell them!” He shrieked. “Tell them what happened here! My number my number. Five-Six-Eight-Nine-Four-Seven-Seven, I have to remember. I had a name once! I... I had it. It was... Five six eight nine four seven.... Five six... six....” His muzzle scrunched up. “Simple Heart. Tell them! What happened... remember. Remember your number, and my name. Please.”

Three ponies walked into view. Two were dressed in all concealing security armour making them indeterminable, but the one in front I could see. She was a astoundingly pretty lavender unicorn with a sea green mane chopped short. Her smile was pleasant as she trotted over to Simple Heart's cage. “Talking to yourself again?” She paused... “What was your number?”

“Five-Six-Eight-Nine-Four-Seven-Seven” he said instantly. “No... talking to Wildfire. He pointed at me and I felt my heart sink. Something about that mare made me want to curl away and hide.

Her crimson eyes flashed at me. Only... through me. As if I wasn't even there. “You're a real piece of work aren't you?”

“Yes Miss Baptisia.” he bobbed his head up and down. “Seeing things. Bad things. Sorry. So sorry. It won't happen again. I promise.”

She laughed venomously. “No, because you won't be coming back.” He gulped. “Not like that, after this you'll be... free.” That didn't seem pleasant at all. “Red and Rum.” she looked back at the two anonymous guards. At once the two 'helped' the white unicorn out of his cell, and 'escorted' him down the hall. He didn't even try to fight back. Part of me hoped he'd look back at me one last time.

The pony named Baptisia did though. Not at me, but close enough it made no difference. For a second she opened her mouth and I thought she was about to say something. But she just let out a breath and walked away, her green tail whisking behind her. She stopped though, and gave me one last lingering look with her crimson eyes.

When she left, there was just me.

Well, not just me. Darkness was with me too. It wasn't your usual sort of darkness, but the kind that closed in each second I waited. At first my pipbuck light was enough to shine across the hallway of cells, but it grew weaker. At the end of the hallway was a deep and growing darkness, and it moved towards me. It was slow, but certain. Whatever the darkness was, it was going to reach me sooner rather than later.

It was just a dream though. Or something close to a dream, I was sure. So it didn't matter if my light faded, I would wake up soon and find whoever was messing with me. Only. I didn't wake up. The sinking feeling in my chest grew, and my stomach twisted itself further into the knots the longer I waited. Something was wrong, something was so very wrong.

“It's just a dream.” I said to the darkness, but it declined to reply.

“Is it?” Something replied, but not the encroaching darkness. Something else said that, someone.

A thin mist came out of the darkness and swam along the ground in front of my cage. It swirled in a circle before rising upwards with a dramatic thrust, becoming what could only be described as a tornado. Slowly, ever so slowly, the mist turned red and started swirling into shape. The red mist took the form of a pony, but didn't stop there, it added details and figures until I realized who it was.

It was at that moment I realized I couldn't have been dreaming. All my dreams ended with Wildfire dying, but here she was already dead and standing before me.

“Ah.” The ghostly apparition cracked its neck, “It has been so long since I've taken this form.” Her phantom eyes addressed me coldly. “You look like shit, hon. No offence.”

“Y-y-you.” Get it together, Silver. She's not real. It wasn't the first time I've seen her. I was just going crazy again, nothing to worry about. “You're dead,” I said finally. “I saw you die you...” bled. There was so much blood, and I could still hear the sound of it dripping to the ground.

“Yeah.” She gave me a weak smile. “Sorry about that, hon.” She scratched a spot on her head and looked down the hallway, “We don't have long. I've missed you.”

“I...” Tears stung my eyes. “I missed you, too. I'm sorry.” My nose was running too, so I wiped at it with my leg. “You never should have come with me to 42... I shouldn't have gone. It was... I fucked up. Meadow didn't even want me. I'd hoped...”

She leaned against an invisible wall, wisps of red smoke rising from her. “I shouldn't have come with you... hell, I don't need to tell you I'm no fighter. Ain't never been, but after what happened... with Foundation.” Just her saying that name sent my head spinning with a throbbing sensation in the base of my skull. “And after... I thought maybe you went there to... die. One last hurrah, and hon, I couldn't let that happen.” There was a pause and a bitter chuckle, “Well that worked out didn't it? I'm dead and here

you are... “ She looked towards the creeping darkness. “No time to reminisce. I'm sorry.”

“Are you really here?” My throat felt raw. “Or... is this just my mind playing tricks with me?”

“Does it really matter? Listen, hon. Maybe I am real, but if I was, nothing could convince you of it.” As she spoke puffs of red smoke came out of her mouth. “Silver, you need to rest. I know... I know sometimes things are beyond what you can do, but you need to get back to Dise and rest. With that Platinum Haze there, maybe. She seems nice.”

If she'd even take me now. Wait... I looked over at Wildfire and blushed furiously, was she really suggesting this. “I don't know what-”

“Right, with the denial. I'm dead, hon, ain't cheating, and she seems like a right fine mare. And a Goddess too, now ain't that somethin'?” Her smirk was seductive and her eyes half-lidded, but the expression was lost on her semi-transparent misty face. “And I want you to talk to that poor foal'a yours. Tell her with no ifs ands or buts that you're her momma, okay?”

“But...” Memories of Foundation ran through my head making me feel faint. “You know I can't just... what if I fail. What if... I can't put her there. I'm not ready!”

“Well, get ready!” she snapped at me. “Dammit, Silver, have you seen the way she looks at you? After what you did, you're lucky she's willing to take you back, but she needs somepony there for her, and you've already accepted the spot. Saying it aloud won't change shit, but it'll do her a world of good. Yeah it's tough, hon, I understand. After what happened... but she needs this more than you need to hide from your past.” Her voice softened. “You can do it, Silver, really.”

I gave her a small smile. “Came here to lecture me, then? Oh, that brings back memories.” I sat down and noticed the darkness creeping in ever closer. “Yeah... you're right. Always were. I'll... try.” She gave me a stern gaze with her ghostly eyes. “I will.”

“I know it's hard, hon.” She looked over into the darkness. It was so close now, parts of her misty body were dissolving and being sucked in. “Time's up. Fuck. It's never long enough. Silver. Listen to me. I know it's hard, I know life likes to kick you around, but don't give up! Keep going! You are strong, and you're smarter than you realize.” Phantom tears fell from her eyes and turned into smoke. “I know you miss me... and...” My tears joined hers. “I miss you too. I know... I *know* you can do better, be the hero you wanted to be. You can do it... so don't give up. I have faith in you.”

The darkness was on us now. The light from my pipbuck faded completely as the black swirled around us like rushing wind that chilled me to the bone. It engulfed Wildfire first sucking up her ghostly smoke and leaving nothing but a pair of green crying eyes. “Silver...” the eyes said crying smoke. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Tears fell from my eyes and into the swirling dark. Part of me knew it wasn't really her, just an apparition, just my mind's image of what she should be and what she should say. But it didn't matter. It was enough for me to hear her voice again.

Her eyes vanished, too, and I was finally alone. Just me and my thoughts, and I couldn't imagine worse company.

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I woke up alone.

The first thing I realized was that I was no longer in the security room with the monitors (which is where, presumably, I'd lost consciousness) and instead I was in the same cell as I'd been in, in the dream. At least, I think it was a dream. Sometimes it was hard to tell. There were differences though. Such as the cage door being broken off, and there actually being light. Though, I was lying in the same spot as in my dream. My stomach lurched in protest, it was too uncanny and just...

“Don't think about it.” I said to myself to break the silence.

So I didn't. Instead, I rolled over and got to my hooves. My knees were shaking as I stood there, and I felt a cold sweat on my brow. That felt... safe. I took a tentative peek outside my cell and looked back and forth down the narrow hallway. It was remarkably like my dream, down to the last detail. Especially when I looked down the hallway to the exit; the last few lights had gone out, leaving it in darkness. Just darkness. I could almost feel the cold it emanated.

This wasn't my dream though, so it wasn't a cold bastion of evil (or whatever it was supposed to symbolize in my dream-space), but just a lack of light. Which did so much to alleviate my fears. My head pounded to look at it, but I remembered the dream well enough. It was the only way I could go.

So I took a step forward. The impact trembled up my leg and shook my body and made me cough. How long had I been out? Why did I feel so weak? It couldn't have been that long... So I took another step, this time with my metal leg, and it proved much sturdier. Just one step at a time. I could do this. Something had happened. My head was swimming and pounding, but I had to get out. To search, to find out what had happened.

Flare and Serenity were gone. As I walked through, past the cages, I looked in each one. None of them contained my companions, though a few held skeletons. Each step made the next easier as I closed in on the darkness. Still, my body felt so... wrong. My back legs were cramped and itching, and my stomach twisted. Something was wrong with the situation. What though, I couldn't say.

Something snapped behind me. My body reacted faster than my mind. I turned on the spot and lowered myself, ready to lunge. The sound of my heartbeat was all I could hear. Steadily my heart slowed down and only the whirring of lights remained. Whatever cracked behind me was gone, or never existed.

*...How long is she going to be like that?...*

Right. Just my nerves. Turning, I faced the darkness again and stepped towards it. There was more shaking, and my mane stuck to my face from the sweat, but I was moving. Maybe they'd poisoned me., and that's why everything was so difficult. That had to be it. The voice on the speaker... he was behind this. If I could find him, kill him, then I'd be able to find them. Find Serenity. Wildfire told me I had to talk to her, so I had to.

I moved into the darkened hallway. You know, it seemed ominous before, but as I stood in it, I realized it was nothing at all. It was barely dark at all when I got closer, and I could even see the door to leave the hallway. It was simple. Just simple. I walked through the darkness and opened the door. There was nothing to worry about at all.

“MINOTAUR SPY! EXTERMINATE!”

For a second there I thought the universe was going to go five minutes without fucking me over.

The Protectitron fired a wave of green energy at me. I didn't even have the chance to dodge as the bolt hit my scarred face. Searing pain filled my vision, and all I could smell was burnt flesh. My legs gave out and I collapsed to the ground, letting the second bolt fly over my head bathing me in heat. Great. I lifted my head up and saw the cone object rolling close. It was going to kill me.

Only... it didn't. Instead it rolled over and bellowed, “YOU HAVE ASSUMED THE SUBMISSION POSITION! AWAIT SCAN OR BE DESTROYED!”

A small devise popped out of the machine and flashed a light over me that tasted like blue. My shoulder burned warily, as it stood over with its little scanner thing. You know, it wasn't really doing much, but it was close and taking its time. Whatever drug me to this cell didn't have the wherewithal to remove my

barding. Which meant....

I reached into my collar pocket, pulled out the Spark Pulse Emitter, and jammed it into the machine. Bolts of electricity danced around the machine as it cried. "STAY SS-S-S-S-S-STiiiiiiLLLL OoOOR..."

"Or what?" I asked with a self-satisfied smirk. Sure, everything hurt, but I'd kicked that machine's ass.

I really wanted to just lay there forever, but I remembered some internal system in these stupid things repairs them from anything but the most serious damage. Of course my spark pulse emitter had probably taken that down too, but who knew for how long. So I got up faster than I wanted, ignored my shaking body, and took a look around. The room seemed to be a fairly spacious office, with a few desks (and accompanying skeletons) scattered around. From the looks of it, the room was not in the security wing we found before, which would make sense as these prisoners were being kept from outside the facility.

Turning back to the robot, I wondered if I would be able to smash it like the one in the cafeteria.... I didn't think so. I was not really feeling up to my usual strength, and that'd take too much of my scant energy. So instead, I stumbled my way around the room looking for some sort of weapon.

Turns out my luck was not entirely shit as I found a pristine (barely working) combat shotgun under one of the desks. For a second I thought it was painted pink, but it was just my imagination. With the shotgun in mouth I limped my way back to the robot.

Following High Stakes' example, I moved the shotgun to near point blank. Two shots later, there was a huge hole in the machine. At that point, I shoved my metal leg in and kicked the shit out of it, until its internal components looked like pasta. Then I pointed the shotgun in it again for one last blast.

If I was going to explore this damnable place, I'd want it to be without being followed by death throwing pieces of shit.

First things first though. I looked around for the nearest terminal. If the wasteland had taught me anything, it was that terminals only had so much information, and usually it was always relevant to the situation at hand. The nearest was on the desk from which I obtained my new shotgun. It was also the only in the room, which I thought was very suspicious.

*//Enter Password//*

My pipbuck did its magic thing, and just like that, the computer opened up. From the looks of it, all the entries in the terminal were listed by date. Just to see what was on, I clicked one at random.

*Day 451*

*Project Completion: 67%*

*Subject Causalities: 2*

*Remaining Subjects: 7*

*Subject Morale: Poor*

*Notes: A series of blunders made today especially poor for morale, pertaining to both subjects and testers. Firstly: When attempting to implement the framework into Subject Gamma's form, Dr. M forgot to properly enhance the magical restraints resulting in rejection by Subject Gamma's body. Attempts to revive Subject Gamma were unsuccessful. Secondly: when trying out a new stabilizing agent*

*(Codenamed: Rainbow) Subject Theta escaped from their restraints. Subject Theta managed to find a scalpel that was to be used in the surgery and injure five doctors, including Dr. P. All tests were halted for the day.*

*Subject Sigma still refuses to consume more than one meal a day.*

*Overseer B is pushing to complete the project before W. engages in one of his impromptu inspections. Overseer B believes that, with the facilities and tests as they are, we will not be able to hide the truth. With that in mind, Overseer B has ordered a new shipment from Snake Bite and ordered an increase in testing.*

*That was. Well... it made me feel better. I mean, sure I felt weak, my whole body was shaking, and I was sweating like a radhog, but at least I wasn't being mutilated in testing. Against my better judgement I scrolled up the list to the last entry date. This should be... interesting.*

*Day 500*

*Project Completion: 99%*

*Subject Casualties: 0*

*Remaining Subjects: 1*

*Test Subject Morale: Non-Existent*

*Notes: Today is the day, Overseer B assures us. She has ordered this final note be recorded for posterity. We managed to replicate results on the small scale with Subject Beta the day before. Though Subject Beta later died of complications due to repeat testing, the theory is solid. With W.'s inspection within the week, Overseer B has put us on an accelerated timetable. Subject Sigma will begin and finish the procedure today, instead of the week as is recommended. Overseer B believes this is worth the risk, as if successful, it could mean a definitive end to the war, and W. will gain all credit for it. Even if he is angry over our... willingness to disobey, he will not be able to publicly reprimand us.*

*However, Subject Sigma has been showing signs of stress and psychosis. Even if tests are successful, the subject's mind may not be able to process the increased information, and the subject may not be able to follow commands. Doctors M., Y. and T. have signed an official recommendation to wait for a new shipment, but Overseer B and Operator K have denied authorization.*

*...*

*I'm going to break protocol here because I want this on the record. I hate what we're doing here, and I hate what we are throwing away to do it. When this is over, I have made plans for me... well. I won't be around long after the war. What was done here was monstrous, but it was a monster of necessity. We can't win the war conventionally, and Overseer B. understands that, so she created this way we could win. She understands the tensions growing here in Caledonia, not just between us and the Minotaurs, but between us and Equestria. She understands that if we don't act fast there won't be a Caledonia to save, and she even understands that there might not be a world left if it goes on too long.*

*What she doesn't understand, is that when we save the world, we won't have a place in it. The things*

*we have done are too unforgivable. It was the only option, but it has tainted our souls. This new world won't be for me. Or for her. But for our children, and our children's children. We can have peace in their time, and it was for them I woke myself up every day for nearly two years. Soon it'll all be over though. The world will have peace... and then I'll have mine.*

*I don't know why I am writing this here, but it needs to be written. I'm a horrible pony. For everything I have done. For all the ponies who died. I am truly sorry. I don't deserve to live any longer, and I won't.*

What could I really say?

I hated this nameless doctor with every fibre of my being, and yet I felt bad for her. She truly thought all this was going to save the world, save her countries and her kids, but in the end she failed. Something horrible happened here beyond her control and the world still ended. So what could I say about her? Maybe she got what she deserved... whatever that was.

Unlike all the other desks in the room, hers was lacking a skeleton. So... I guess she died before the end of the world. Maybe she offed herself when it all failed, or she was taken away for what she wrote. Whatever punishment she got it would never be good enough, and it would always be too much. It was just too much. I really hated this place. What else could I do but rest my forehead on the desk and wonder where ponykind had gone wrong.

When I lifted my head, there was a spot discoloured by my sweat. Well, that was pleasant. With nothing else for me in this room I took one last look around for supplies (hoping for a med-x or healing potion to be honest), but there was nothing of the sort. Eventually, I had to leave the relative safety of the room and venture outside. I was not sure how well it'd work, considering, but ponies needed rescuing. Probably.

Before even thinking of going out the exit, though, I checked my EFS. Like I should have done earlier. It was thankfully clear, but I was not really confident. Surely something out there was going to kill me, it was the way of things. Of course, I didn't really have a choice in the matter so I shakily opened the door.

Another bland looking hallway. Lovely. Oh, and the office was right across from a janitorial closet. So there's that.

I looked both ways down the hallway to make sure the coast was clear before walking out. Because everything ever hated me, as soon as I'd taken two steps into the hallway, I started hearing voices. My eyes darted back and forth down each section of hallway but my EFS was clear. Either they were far away, or they didn't count as existing. Either way, I darted (read: limped fast) into the janitor closet.

As soon as I entered the dark room (I stepped on a rat trap, I hoped they didn't hear...) and quickly shuffled around the clutter so I could peer out a crack in the door. It took a few minutes before the voices got loud enough to hear. The first I was surprised to find I recognized.

"...Understand that, due to the nature of the job, all information is very confidential. Any leak of information is treated as willful treason," a sickly sweet mare's voice said. "Not that I suspect it of you, but I'm required to explain that little tidbit so no pony gets any ideas. One pony tried giving away information, but their contact was a plant..."

"I'm guessing," a youthful stallion said, "they were executed."

"Quite right," the mare said with a short laugh. "You'll fit right in." The pair of ponies walked into view from the crack I was looking through.

Like I expected, the mare was in fact the mare from my dreams, Baptisia (worth noting that this time I

got a chance to see her cutie mark: a wilted flower) while the other was a young brown stallion with a blond mane and a huge grin. Interestingly enough both were... transparent. As if they were just holograms. Even still, I didn't risk letting myself be seen. Just in case. They walked out of view as fast as they came into it.

“So when does the project start!” The stallion seemed to be bursting with enthusiasm. “Sorry. It is just I have been trying to get a government job for so long. Help the war effort you know?”

“Yes, but please understand; we aren't officially government.”

“Right right.” The stallion laughed. “You're working for Wallkirk who is contracted by the government. It's close enough.”

“Yes, but it's an important distinction. Plausible deniability and all that.” The mare's voice did not seem amused. “Here is your office. Your duties don't start for a month so you have time to acquaint yourself with the facility. You will be in charge of keeping profiles on all subjects, including side effects and moods. Beyond that you are to write up daily reports and assist other doctors if needed. Your full duty list will be emailed to you in the coming weeks. There's a meet and greet with the newcomers next Thursday. Any questions?”

“None at all!” I could almost hear the cheerfulness in his voice. “I just can't wait to get started. We'll do a lot of good here, I'm sure!”

Then there was nothing at all. It was like they'd completely vanished. Assuming, of course, they were ever there to begin with. I was starting to think the facility enjoyed fucking with me. There was a cold chill behind me. Turning around, I saw a pair of ghostly eyes burning like the sun.

I ran. I didn't stop until I was all the way down the hall and out of breath. Whatever it was, it didn't follow me. Not yet...

---

I kicked a hole in the medical box.

Whatever level I was on, it had a shit-load of medical labs and surgery stuff. Yet no matter where I looked, not a single one of the medical boxes had any med-x at all. Hell, I had managed to find only a single healing potion too. Apparently this place was not big on the recovery aspect of surgery. Not that it was really much of a surprise. After taking my hoof out of the box, I kicked the empty thing away and turned back to the room.

It was a lovely surgery chamber of questionable morality. This was best demonstrated by the fact a skeleton was still strapped to the operation table by harnesses that did not seem at all consensual. It was not, of course, the only skeleton in the room, as when I tried to walk for the exit, my hoof got caught in a rib cage. The unfortunate pony was dressed up in a lab coat, so I didn't really feel bad for desecrating her corpse. It was annoying though, having to kick my leg several times to get her off.

So far my adventure in the labs had been a resounding failure. I found more than a few bloodstained surgery rooms, a few labs with broken equipment, and an office locked with a regular key. I'd been too weak to try and break down the door (I could have if I had tried, but I didn't want to waste my limited energy on it.) So it was summarily ignored in favour of this lab that I had hoped would have something to help me make it through. It hadn't, obviously.

However, the surgery room was directly connected to an office, and maybe that had information, or something. I limped my way over there to find the door said 'Dr. Maplewood'. It was already half open too so I didn't even need to limp my way over.

It was a lovely small room with a 'Grand Galloping Gala' poster on the wall and a terminal on the desk.

Other than that there was nothing of note in the room but... but... a vial of med-x.

Holy shit! My eye must have been bulging out of my socket, and my heart was racing a mile a minute as I stared at it. Yes, I knew this stupid place would have one! With that I would be able to ignore my body's weakness and press on, nothing would be able to stop me. I dove for it and jammed the needle into me waiting for sweet relief.

Nothing.

No relief. No wash of heat. Nothing but me staring at the needle in teary eyed confusion. Looking down at the needle that was jammed into my side, I saw it was empty.

It had always been empty. It was just a thrown-away vial. In my rush I hadn't even noticed.

"Fuck!" I tore the syringe out and bit down so hard it shattered. "Fuck!" I said again, this time punctuating by spitting out blood and glass shards. "Just..." A wave of nausea washed over me making my stomach flip and my head to spin. Everything got dizzy and I just had to sit down. Sit down and wait for it to pass. "Just, ugh."

Thankfully, the wave of nausea passed without me throwing up or passing out. My head still felt out of it, but I was able to move again. Slowly at first. Not wanting to risk meeting any robots until my head space went back to semi-normalcy I crawled my broken ass over to the terminal.

*//Password//*

"Fuck you." I growled as my pipbuck did that glowing burning thing. The machine whirled and booted up. Without any prompting, an email popped up on the screen.

*Dammit Bap, I'm a doctor, not a spy!*

That was literally all it said. It was in the outgoing messages folder, and I decided whoever wrote it was my hero. I was a big fan of witty one liners. To appease my curiosity (and because my stomach was still being a bitch) I clicked to see what exactly the message was a reply to.

*Maple, I need your help. Walkkirk is coming in four days, and you're the only pony I can trust. By now I'm sure somepony told him what happened, and he won't like that one bit. I need something against him, some dirt that'll make him too afraid to work against me. A little birdy told me he has spies in the Equestrian Ministry Of Image, Stable-Tec, and something called 'OIA'. If I could find out what he's doing, get evidence of his involvement, something on him... I need your help. Right now, the facility is turning its back on me. They all agreed and helped before, but now... they won't even let me leave. It was to save the world, it almost worked! It...*

*Doesn't matter, does it? Because it didn't work, and now it's all on me. Please, Maple. You have friends, friends that have turned on me. You're the only one I have left. Please, try to find something. Anything.*

*Baptisia*

Suddenly, Maple's reply was less of a witty one liner, and more of her betraying her friend in thirty characters or less. It did nothing at all to settle my stomach. Sure, this Baptisia was a total bitch, but, her friends should still have stuck by her instead of making her take the fall... for whatever happened. I still didn't know that much. Something about test subjects and...

Something started laughing in my ear. It was a small subtle chuckle that sent shivers down my spine.

The monitor fell off the desk with a crash from my kick, giving me enough space to jump over the desk and scramble for the door. My heart was in my throat by the time I reached the door. Against my better judgement, I turned around to see who was laughing.

Nothing. Only the lingering memory of closeness, and the sense of wrongness in my gut. This was just getting weird.

“Okay, calm, Silver.” I said it aloud to hear a voice that wasn't creepy in my head. It didn't calm me, but it grounded me. I was Silver Storm. Hired Gun. I'd lost legs and eyes and half my face. I'd charged down minotaurs and gunned down land sharks. I'd gotten up from near death on too many occasions, and I had escaped from capture like a million fucking times. I wasn't about to be scared by ghosts!

With all my rage, I tried to buck over the operating table in the lab. Unfortunately it was bolted to the floor, and I was weak as fuck, so what happened was I kicked it and faceplanted. Because what I needed right now was more fucking head trauma. At least it wasn't into a skeleton. I slowly got back to all fours and took a deep breath. The fresh air cleared my mind. Just needed to calm down.

I slowly, whilst keeping an eye on my EFS, trotted back into the hallway. Just in time for the voice in the speakers to make its reappearance. “Do Not Delve Further Into History Or It Will Be Your Doom!”

Well that was interesting. A ghoul perhaps, who survived whatever went wrong. Oh, now this was interesting. I so loved mysteries. So much... Not that I had a chance to look. A wave of nausea washed over me dropping me to a knee hard. My stomach twisted as I heaved my guts onto the floor. Hated. Puking. Ugh...

I fell over. Just needed to rest for a bit. After that I could keep going. Find Serenity and Flare...

---

My eyes burst open. Where was I? On my back. In the darkness, somewhere. Everything was dark, and I could hear my heart racing in my chest. Squirming didn't seem to help at all. On all sides, something was stopping me. Dammit. I needed to get out. Out of wherever I was.

I flailed my metal leg to the side and hit something. The sound that came from my hit sounded a lot like wood. When I tried to other side I heard the same sound. Above and below me as well. Wood, just wood. Dumb as I was, it didn't take long for me to realize where I was. Somepony buried me alive....

I tried to roll over and my casket creaked. When I carefully pressed my hoof to the roof of my tomb, I could feel the meters of dirt pushing back. Fuck. Okay. So I was underground surrounded by black darkness. So what. It was like being captured by death, and I've escaped worse predicaments, right? I just needed to use my not-brain and figure this out. How hard could it be. Just. Breathe.

My breath was ragged, and parts I couldn't reach itched. Okay. Calm was not working. Not working at all. Wait, my pipbuck light. There was barely enough room but I managed to squeeze my hoof over to flick the light.

My body was washed over by the amber light. It was beautiful, the power to see in blackness, but it wasn't enough to stem my growing fears. Even with it, I still had no way out. I could see the lines of wood, every knot and crack, but in the end it didn't help me break out. All it did was confirm my predicament. Trapped under the ground. No way to escape. No hope.

I might have screamed.

When my throat was raw, I stopped. That didn't help. Panicking didn't help. Needed to be calm. Even though my tomb was closing in. Thousands of pounds of dirt pressed in on every side ready to squash me, but I just had to be calm. But I couldn't. I was going to die. Crushed.

Maybe it was better this way. It was an okay way to go. It'd be quick, I think. Not painless, but only as painful as I deserved. Celestia above knows I didn't deserve peace after all I did, but it'd be nice, you know? Just lie down and sleep. Never have to worry about anything ever again. No more haunting dreams, or regrets. It'd be...

*Survive*, the little pony in my head that liked to live whispered. But why? And for what? I was already buried, so why not die too?

Because Serenity needed me. She was... where was she? My mind was foggy and it was hard to remember, but I knew she was lost and needed my help. So I had to find her. Break free. Even in the darkness. Even as the walls pounded in on my, and each second called for my doom. If for nothing else I'd survive for her.

I kicked upwards. The wood instantly cracked along a groove, showering me with dirt. Instead of letting it bother me, I spit out the dirt and kicked again, And again. Each time my hoof hit, the hole got wide and wider. I could escape this, all I needed was one more kick.

---

My eyes opened.

Once again, the whiteness of the facility startled me. I was back. Of course, I'd never really left. Just sorta passed out... or the facility made me pass out. It reminded me so much of the tunnels, only where the tunnels were very blunt with their creepiness, the facility was subtle. Very subtle.

Most of the time. Right now though something was standing above me. There was a warm breath on my back, and the sound of breath. Nothing to be afraid of. There was a pressure on my back from a hoof. Probably just a ghost rapist I had somehow insulted. Not bad at all. Against the part of my brain screaming how bad an idea this was I turned my head to see.

Nothing was there, and pressure went away. I must have imagined it...

I didn't move for a long time though, and I don't think I could have if I tried. As I lay there on the floor the only thing I could think about was how I must have been going insane. Eventually, and with great effort, my body started to calm down enough for me to get back up. When I finally made it back to my hooves I realized I'd been lying next to a pile of vomit. Mine, from before. Thankfully I hadn't rolled over onto it in my weird... dream... thing.

“VAGRANT DETECTED! INITIATING DELETION PROTOCOL!” My eyes darted down the to where the cone robot was rolling up. You know what sucks? A blast of green energy slamming into my chest and making my chest feel like it was on fire.

“Celestia damn, just, aghr.” I said as I stumbled backwards. I really hated these things. Just as I managed to dodge a second burst, I looked behind me. There was a hallway splitting off from the one I was in just a few meters behind me. It wouldn't give up right there, but it'd give me time to plan and think. Because I did both of those things so well.

Another blast flew over my head, scorching my mane. Right, leaving. I scrambled backwards as fast as my weak legs could take me and threw myself around the corner. Resting my back against the wall, I felt my ragged breath burn my chest. Clearly I was sick with something, I just didn't know what. It was enough to make this facility hellish. I could make it though. Worse things than sickness, haunted ancient labs, and murderous robots had tried to kill me and failed. Just need to think about how to do this in the way that kills me less.

“UNIDENTIFIED SUBSTANCE LOCATED! COMMENCING CLEANING!”

Wait, what? Slowly, I peeked around the corner to see the metal monster standing above my vomit

puddle... and cleaning it with a strange vacuum thing. That was awesome. Now I just needed to find liquids and throw them in front of those robots whenever they got close as a distraction. It wouldn't stop them forever, but it'd be just long enough for me to get away. Which I should have done while watching it. Right.

After hiding back behind the wall my eyes scanned the hallway I was in. Hallways and labs. Just what I'd always wanted. Alright, whatever. I picked myself back up and ignored the sensation that I was being watched. This facility had more mysteries, and more importantly it had my friends. Somewhere. So far, my luck at finding them was nil. It wasn't like they were just going to appear in front of me. It was going to take time and effort, and a lot of searching.

Something flashed on my EFS in front of me. A red mark and... Amber. A friendly... Either that was Flare, Serenity, or a robot that somehow gained sentience and wanted to help me. Since that last option was rather unlikely, I ran forward at full gallop. Given my condition, my full gallop was a slightly faster than normal limping run. Regardless, I ran like a mare on a mission. Which I was.

The EFS was moving away from me and when I reached the right hand turn at the end of the hallway and turned towards the mark in my vision, it had already gone down another hallway. Whoever designed this building deserved to be flayed, because it was a fucking maze. So I ran down that hallway too and turned again where my EFS said the robot and its buddy were.

Another long hall exactly like the last two. Only this one had other occupants. Like a cone-shaped robot dragging a blue pegasus in a net. My heart leaped. Flare. I'd found him, thank Celestia I'd finally found him! Now I just needed to find Serenity and then find a way to get out of this place and never, ever, go back. Ever. My hate for this place could not be described in mere words. It had to be written in the blood of whoever had built it.

“DO NOT INTERFERE WITH PRISONER SUBJUGATION PROTOCOL!” Well, that explained why I ended up in a cell. Apparently these things just dragged them there after defeating them with green, pulsating, suck balls. That sounded wrong. Whatever, killing time.

The robotic kidnapper fired a bolt of green energy when I started to get close. Luckily for me, it slammed against my metal leg, leaving a black mark, but causing no damage. It didn't get a chance at a second. Apparently the programming on it made it so it didn't fire at me until I was far too close, which gave me plenty of time to jam my spark pulse emitter into it. Electric energy danced around the machine's casing as smoke started to rise from its crevices. Less than a second later, the Protectitron was silent.

Normally I'd have freed Flare, but I knew these things could were able to partially reconstruct themselves so I took out my shotgun and unloaded it the rest of its ammo into the fucker. This was followed by 'carefully' using my metal hoof to tear it apart. Or at least apart enough that it wouldn't be able to fix itself quickly, if ever. Time to get me a pegasi.

I turned back to where Flare was netted in a ball. Only, it wasn't him that caught my attention. The faceless pony stood over him and watched me. Just as quickly it vanished again leaving me with a feeling of dread.

*...Oh yes, right there, that's the spot...Ooooh...*

I froze. Okay. My hallucinations just got dirty on me. In Wildfire's voice. Because apparently being laced with burn wounds, suffering from some strange sickness, being weak, dizzy, nauseous, and hallucinating wasn't enough. I also had to be horny. Fuck you, ominous facility of death. Really.

Okay. Needed to focus on anything other than that. Like kneeling down and making sure Flare was

okay. And that it was Flare, because I hadn't gotten a good look. So I slowly rolled the pegasus shaped ball over so I could see his face. Well, the stallion certainly looked like Flare, same pompous smirk even while sleeping, same mane. I would have checked his cutie-mark but he was still wearing that Enclave style armour.

"Hey. Hey. Wake up." I shook the body but he didn't react. So I shook him more. "Flare. Wake up. C'mon. Dumbass." I sat back. This was not working at all.

*...oooh. Oh...OOOH!...*

I was getting light headed, and my face felt really warm. Not to mention the feeling in other body parts. Damn, this place was really just messing with me now.

*...Oh My... you're getting so much better... now it's your turn...*

"Flare!" I kicked the unconscious body. "Wake the fuck up." Because I needed something to get my mind off the voices in my head. You'd think being sick and in pain would stop my libido. Maybe it was because I hadn't been with a pony since... well I had thought Pearly, but apparently before that. I kicked him harder. "Seriously." Nope nothing. Oh for fucks sucks.

*...Oh Silv-*

Nope nope nope. Not listening. I leaned over Flare and sighed. Whatever sort of deep sleep he was in, it wasn't natural. It was like the tunnels all over again. "Flare." Slowly, I untangled him from the net so he had more room. You know, when his mouth wasn't flapping, he wasn't bad looking. His face was cute, if a little girly, and he was well-kempt. The armour without the helmet was kind of dashing too...

And he was gay. Don't forget that part. Clearly my mind was in a bad place if I was thinking about *Flare* like that. Stupid bloody voices in my head, making me aroused. Closing my eyes didn't help either, because when I did, my mind filled the darkness with images of Wildfire in... compromising positions.

"Agh." I slammed my hoof into the ground. "This is stupid." So very stupid. Even still, I leaned over Flare's sleeping face. "Wake up." I pressed my forehead against his. "Please." No, I didn't kiss him. Because when I was about to, there was a sound of rushing water in my ears, making my eyes cross and my head feel dizzy. So dizzy.

---

Another dream. I was starting to get the feeling these weren't normal dreams.

At least this one put me in a place I knew, instead of a coffin. I was standing in front of the apartment-building-turned-Enclave-base in south Dise. Only, it wasn't all of Dise. It was like this small section was torn out of a book and I could see the ridges. All around was a swirling red and black void, and the only available direction was into the Enclave base. Only the base looked a bit different. It looked newer than I remembered and a lot brighter. Nearly every window in the building was glowing, and that was an unusual sight in Dise, not counting the House-owned buildings of course.

On the bright side, without the moaning in my ears, I was feeling far less amorous. Of course that sensation was replaced with a sinking feeling in my gut that something really bad was about to happen very soon. Since the dream only gave me a choice of creepy void of death or the Enclave base, I walked towards the former apartment building. Each hoofstep felt heavy and sent gravel flying from the path when I walked.

Two guards flanked the entrance when I walked up, and when I walked up they pointed impressive

looking MEW's at me. Great. I was about to be hit by more energy bolts, and I wasn't even awake. Apparently the universe liked to fry me.

“Halt, who goes there?” The two pegasi spoke in near unison.

“Uh.” Right.... I wondered what name to use. Considering it was a dream, they'd probably only react to my given name, but since it was also a dream of Dise, my chosen name might actually work. This guards looked displeased at my delay, and the rightmost shot a warning on the ground in front of my hoof making me jump.

“Name!” they repeated.

“Hired Storm!” Okay. I might have panicked a little bit there. The pair looked at each other in creepy symmetry and the rightmost spoke quietly into his helmet.

A few tense seconds later and they spoke again. “The Admiral is expecting you. Make your way to the third-floor training room. Do not touch anything. Do not take pictures. If your eye has a remote camera we will know.” Huh, that was right. My eye. I had gotten so used to the boxes it put around ponies I didn't even realize these ponies didn't have them. Must have been a facet of the dream world. I kind of missed them now. They made the world more colourful, and less brown.

The entrance to the building slid open with a subtle hiss. Fancy. I trotted inside to find a surprisingly high-tech building. It was a metallic interior with a series of banners about pegasi superiority hanging on all the walls. Every door was the sliding type, and, peeking inside a few, I noticed high-tech labs and terminals. All of which looked very brand new. You know, my subconscious was very weird if this is what it was bringing up.

Not that this was a normal dream anyway. The last few hadn't been. They were dream-like, only they felt a lot more real. I've had realistic dreams before, mind you, but these might as well have been actually happening. The only reason I knew it was a dream at all this time was because of the incomplete outside.

My mind raced as I wandered through the building, my hooves instinctively knowing where they needed to take me. The more I walked, the more I realized how unnatural all this was. These weren't normal prophetic dreams, they were something else. This Enclave Base made that all the clearer. It was like the Facility was just fucking with me. Which, given its track record....

Still, I kept walking. Somehow, I knew exactly where I needed to go. More weird dream bullshit. As I closed in on my destination, I took a look at some of the pegasi. They seemed real enough, but my eye did not identify them as such, and their actions seemed a little... wooden. Not all the time, but watching one mare flying past me, I noticed at one point her wings did not bend when they flapped. Only once though.

“Creepy,” I muttered aloud. No pony nearby so much as noticed I had said anything. That did nothing to alleviate my suspicions about this place.

I did eventually make it to where I was supposed to go. I knew because it was clearly stated as 'Third Floor Training Room' on a gold plaque on the large double doors. The two doors slid open as I approached revealing a room that was much too large to fit in the building. To my imperfect eyes, it looked to be at least a hundred meters long, and nearly as wide. The whole facility looked like a giant gym, only with high ceilings for pegasi. Various exercise and training equipment were littered around the room. On the far side, a troupe of ten black-clad pegasi (sans helmet) were practising a routine in front of two stallions.

As soon as I realized who the two stallions were, I realized something vital.

This wasn't my dream.

It was Flare's.

“Hey, Hired!” Flare clopped his hooves together and the performing pegasi stopped in a 'v' formation. He was leaning back in an oversized chair with a pony lounging in a smaller one beside him and many dash inhalers scattered around the floor in front of him. Unlike with everypony else, my eye put a coloured box around him, so I knew for sure it was him. “How've ya been? Crazy couple years, eh? Who'd know they'd make me Admiral.” He laughed and leaned back to whisper something to the green unicorn behind him. The two of them laughed. “Ya still look like shit though, eh, but not even time can fix that face, right?”

“What's going on...?” I took a few steps closer as I scanned the pegasi flying guard. Surprisingly one of the faces was familiar. The pegasi named Sail who was a guard with me on that doomed caravan run right after I woke up in Bridal Hope with a new leg. He was dead, but I suppose dreams don't work the same way as logic.

“Training my security detail. All of them volunteered: they used to be my squad *way* back when I was a captain, ya know. It's good to seem them all together again.” And alive, his voice seemed to say. “Stakes thinks it's a waste, and that we can protect ourselves, but hey, better safe than sorry.” At the mention of his name, the stallion beside him leaned over to nuzzle Flare's cheek, eliciting a chuckle and a soft whisper I could barely hear: “Stop it, not in front of guests.” The green stallion stopped, but with a satisfied smirk.

The stallion, however, was not High Stakes. He was close, but not quite. Differences like the fact he was an earth pony now, instead of a unicorn, and that he was bulkier than normal, and not wearing his trademark glasses gave away that the pony was not as he should be.

“That's not what I meant.” My voice sounded ragged and hoarse.

Flare's pink eyes seemed to narrow. “Hired... don't do this,” he said, very carefully. “Just turn around and walk away.” Sensing the threat I seemed to pose, the security detailed lowered and started to surround me. I guess I'd make good target practice. “Let me have this...”

“It's just a dream. Flare-”

“You think I don't know that!” His voice caused waves to ripple through the building like it was made of water. “I'm not stupid. My squad is all but dead to a pony, and Stakes shot you in the face and betrayed me. I know...” his voice went soft. “I know.”

“You know...?” The dreams I had all seemed real until the last second. Even this one I wouldn't have realized if it weren't for the fact it was Flare's dream not mine. “But... why are you still here?”

“I... I like it here.” There was a sad smile on his lips. The pony masquerading as High Stakes leaned over the arm of Flare's chair for a kiss. Never one to turn away a kiss, Flare obliged the pony, but even from where I stood, I could see it was heartless. “My squad's back, High Stakes isn't an ass. Hell, you're here too so everything's set for me. So it's a dream, I don't want to leave.”

“It's not real.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He waved a dismissing hoof and leaned back further in his throne. Obediently, his security detail flew behind it and fanned out, and High Stakes leaned over the arm and held him. “I wake up and suddenly I'm an admiral? Obviously fake as shit, but who cares? Real or fake, I have everything I need. If you aren't going to enjoy it with me, just leave me be.” I tried to speak but he cut me off again. “So what if it's a dream? The dream is better. It's like those tunnels, Hired, you remember? Close your eyes and it'd give you what you wanted. Only this time it's the future I want, not

the past I miss. And fuck, I like it. Not like I was doing anything anyway.”

This wasn't working. I guess it was plan B. By now you should know my plan B is always the same. I charged.

The pegasi squad quickly fluttered in front of my path, but I bowled through them like they weren't even there. 'High Stakes' tried stopping me as well, and I got to live the fantasy of high-speed headbutting him. With them out of the way, I was free to ram into Flare on his throne. The seat cracked and fell over, sending us tumbling over each other. A few chaotic moments later and I had the pegasus on his back.

My forehooves slammed down hard on his wings, pinning him down and eliciting a screech of pain. “Flare!” I yelled. “Snap out of it!” The pegasi writhed on the floor but that only stretched his wings out even more painfully. “Why? You know it's not real. You can have a real life. One that's worth something.”

“Why! Fuck it, Hired, why fight?” His face contorted to a look of anguish. “So I can die in two years when I relapse, or when I get betrayed by the next buck I fuck? I've never done a single thing right in my life, so who cares if I die here in this dream? At least I'll be fucking happy.”

I kicked him in the face. “Dumbass. Is this about High Stakes?” There was a shocked look on his face when he nodded. “Well he's scum. He's not worth you throwing your life away. You knew him, what, two weeks? If that? Get over it.”

“Every buck I date ends up dying or stabbing me in the back.”

“Well then you have shitty luck. Don't throw your life away because of that vermin.” I kicked him again. “You're talented at explosives. An amazing flier. And are handsome. You can do whatever you want. Any stallion would be lucky to have you.”

For a second it looked like he was going to cry, but instead he laughed. “You kicked me!”

“You deserved it!”

The dream cracked and fell apart at the seams.

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I woke up laying over Flare...

“Listen Hired. In case this wasn't clear, I'm very gay.” One of his feathers prodded at me. “And you're very heavy. Mind getting off?” Right, gotcha. I carefully rolled off him and flopped on the ground. My body was still slick with sweat, and my head felt even dizzier than it had before. The lights above me seemed to spin in a circle. “You alright?” He peered over me, his pink eyes narrowing. “Ah, I see.”

I swatted him away half-heartedly. “See what?”

“Tell me.” He poked my nose, making me scrunch it up. “When was the last time you had some med-x?” Really, this again? There was no point answering. I just rolled onto my shaky hooves and started walking past the robot I destroyed earlier. I was not going to discuss that with anypony, especially not him. As if he had any right to judge. “Hired.” I heard his voice following. “I wasn't insulting you Hired.”

“Shut up, Flare.” I still needed to find Serenity and suss out what exactly was happening here. I didn't have time for his wild theories on who I was or what was going on with my body. “We have more important things to do.”

“Which is good.” Flare flapped his way so he was flying backwards in front of me. “If you can do the

things you need to do. Hired. You know how I hate making fun, but you look like shit. Not normal shit neither. The type you get after eating food that wasn't preserved properly all-

“Get to the point.”

“Right. Basically, I'm fairly certain you got yourself hooked on the cool juice.” I stopped and blinked at him a few times. “You know... block, cube, mojo, M, Murphy, mud, Luna's Helper, Celestia's Favourite, first line, hows Miss Blue?” What the fuck was he talking about. “Hired!” He pressed his hooves on my cheeks so I'd pay attention. If I'd felt better, I would have kicked him. “Med-X. You've got it bad.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I pushed away his legs and pressed my hoof on his forehead. “Can we go now?” I pushed hard sending him sliding back in the air. “Serenity is still somewhere, and we need to find her.”

“Oh please, Silver.” The use of that name drew my attention. “Have you seen a mirror? You're sweating, you're shaking, your eyes are dilated as fuck, and that's only what I can see. I'm guessing you have phantom pains, dizziness, and nausea, too?” My only answer was avoiding eye contact. “Nailed. Check your pipbuck, how long have we been in here? Because it seemed like a long time when I woke up the first time.”

“Uh...” I looked down at my pipbuck. It was still on the password screen, but helpfully it listed all the times I'd used it with time stamps. So all I had to do was take the time of the first use, then do a little math. And by a little, I mean it took me five minutes to figure out. A new record. “Nineteen...” No, the first time was an hour before we entered the facility, “Eighteen hours...”

“Yup, withdrawal. I ain't an expert, mind, but I've been through it once'er twice with Dash, and some things are similar I'm pretty sure. Hell, I'd be surprised if the stress and pain of being shot didn't help speed up the symptoms.” I'd no idea if that made any sense at all. “Listen, I'm worried about you. I don't want you going down the same path as me...” I tried walking past him but he zipped in front of me. “Listen. Now I'm sure this is not the ideal place for an intervention, but hear me out. I know shit like this, okay? So you and I are going to find you a med-x so you don't break down, and if we make it back to Dise you're going straight to the Watchers...” he pauses. “It won't get rid of the problem. You'll still want them, but your body won't need it to survive.”

“Fine. Whatever.” I said. It was enough to get us to keep walking.

Honestly I was looking for it anyway because I was blackened and burned from the plethora of energy blasts, and it'd help, but not because whatever he thought. Though... maybe it was true. I wasn't sure. I mean. It was true that I took med-x a lot. Okay, maybe more than a lot. But I needed it a lot. I've had the shit kicked out of me all across the wasteland, and if it wasn't for those painkillers then I wouldn't have survived.

Then again there were a few times I guess, I hadn't needed to take it. I guess. But they still helped even then. Flare was so positive, and Blackwater too. And Flare at least would have a good idea on that sort of thing. Maybe once we were safe I was going to have to think it through. Look at everything that happened. I was fairly certain I wasn't an addict, but a part of me nagged at the back of my mind asking *'what if you're wrong?'* And if I was wrong, well that wasn't something I wanted to burden Serenity with.

*...It'll only sting a little...*

I cried wordlessly in annoyance and built up a limping speed following the pegasus. He didn't react to my annoyance and didn't speed up, forcing me to slow down again. I guess it was for the best because the increased speed had just sent more aches up my already shaky legs.

“Don't go right.” I said when we reached a crossroads. My EFS was flashing a lot of red that direction. He nodded and we kept going forward. I noticed he caught sight of one of the many laboratories on the right side of the hall. I, however, was far more interested in a door to the left. A certain office with the title of 'Overseer' on it. Sure, the lab could have med-x, but that office could have *mysteries*. And they were almost, if not more addicting.

“Where are you going? We're not treasure hunting,” Flare said when he spotted me by the door.

“Shut up, Flare.” I tapped my metal hoof against the wooden door. It sounded really hard. After looking around in vain for an access terminal, and then trying my password to no avail, I had to do the unthinkable: ask Flare for help. “Could you knock this door down?” Normally I could do it, but I was not feeling strong enough, and I didn't want to risk it. I mean, if Flare couldn't I would, but I'd rather not.

“Sure can!” He flew backwards and towards the ceiling. He gave an over exaggerated lick of his lips and flashed towards the door at full speed. I thought for sure he was going to hit it head on. Only, he didn't. Instead, he stopped on a bit right in front of the door, calmly reached a hoof out to the handle, and opened the door. “Not every door is locked Hired.”

“Well aren't you a smart one.” Serenity was smarter. At least in some aspects, but it still amused me to note that a filly was smarter than him. Of course, both were heads and tails above me, but that really wasn't much of a contest.

The office interior was fairly large with the fanciest furnishings I'd seen so far. The floor was actually carpeted (though it seemed a bit stained) and the large desk that took up the majority of the room was carved all fanciful. Hell, there was even a bookshelf with a large number of books I would never be able to understand, not to mention the mountains worth of reports. What interested me the most was the terminal. I know I had more important things to do, but I couldn't help my curiosity.

“What are you doing here anyway?” Flare stood in the doorway. Well, more like leaned against the doorway.

“Something is fucking with us.” He seemed to muse over that before nodding. “On the monitors. That made us pass out. Whatever that was. It was created here. If we can find out what...” I left the ending vague because I was not sure what we could do if we found out. Maybe if the creation process also came with a weakness, but how likely was that.

“Right, well. I'll stand watch. Celestia above knows why I'm letting you, of all ponies, do the reading and investigating.” Well obviously because I already had the head start. And because I felt like I was dying and needed to sit down anyway to clear my head.

So I did just that, but first I had to push the skeleton out of the way and take a seat. With a sigh, I pressed a button on the terminals keypads. I really hated how small they made all these buttons. I was passable with time, but it seemed like it'd take longer than just writing. Luckily for me the computer wasn't even locked. The screen flashed on in the middle of an unfinished email.

*Wallkirk get out of Celestia's Paradise now, or...*

Well that was useful.

“Mind hurrying, Hired?” Flare looked nervously over his shoulder towards the hall before shuffling inside and closing the door.

I would get right on that. After I checked a few more emails. Most of the emails seemed to be deleted though, except for a few marked 'Vital'. After scrolling through a few, I opened a couple that seemed

interesting enough. After that, I planned to look into whatever else was on the computer. Honestly, Flare should have been doing this: he was so much better with technology.

*The speakers in my office are wiggling out. I don't give two shits about ponies thinking my office is haunted, I want it fixed. It keeps going on and off at random, or repeating old messages. Just, fix it. And before you ask I know it's not only happening here, but I'm the overseer of a major project, for fuck's sake. Get your boys up here today!*

*Overseer Maple*

Flare seemed a little more nervous than usual, and was pacing back and forth in front of the door. Which meant it was time for the last email I randomly picked out. Part of me wished I'd time for all of them, but what can you do?

*Yeah it's a little creepy being in her office after everything that's happened, but I deserved this promotion. Bap wanted to help ponies, but she funnelled a lot of money into her pet project and she deserved what she got... not that I know what she got... Won't lie; I got a shivers down my spine a few times today. There's just something about this place that is putting me on edge. There are rumours that Bap died in this office, and it's haunted, but I don't believe it. But I've got more important work to do than worry about ponies long gone. Thanks for the concern though. Keep in touch.*

*Overseer Maple.*

“You about done there?”

“Just a second.” I flipped off the the email closed and looked at all the juicy classified information. It made sense that my password could access it. After the end of the world they must have figured ponies trying to start anew could benefit from this sort of information.

“How about you throw me over the spark taser,” Flare said as he backed away from the door. I think he meant the Spark Pulse Emitter, or whatever it was called.

“Wh-” A flurry of splinters cut me off. Through the door came a storm of green blasts that tore it apart and forced Flare to flip backwards through the air and take cover behind the desk beside me. More greens bursts came through and slammed into the terminal. With a fzzt the computer blacked out and fell apart. Well there went critically important research data I'd never understand anyway.

“Duck!” Flare pulled me down as something rolled into the room.

There was an ominous sound of machinery, and a few boops and beeps like all good robots made.

“Surrender now and you will die painlessly!” The voice was clearly robotic, and loud, but more smooth and suave than the normal Protectitrons.

“Protectitron Mk2, the voice on the speakers told me as much when I woke up the first time. If I didn't have this armour I'd look worse than you.” That wasn't funny at all. “We might die here, just as an FYI.”

“You have ten seconds to comply!” Ever so slowly I peaked out from the side of desk to get a good look at the metal monster. It was similar in some ways to the normal Protectitron. It still had the cone shape and movement patterns, but it was slightly shorter and skinnier, with thick black armour. Oh, and two large Gatling MEW's hanging on either side of its body. This was going to suck.

“Any ideas?” I slipped back into cover. The pegasus shook his head. Great. That means the idea was up to me. “Well... you said you fought one before?”

“Ran from one before,” he corrected me. Great. “They have good tactical sense too. Look at it, it's standing right in the doorway. It knows we're trapped, and it's going to wait us out.” Great. To run down we were facing a heavily armoured mini-tank with gatling lasers without anyplace to run, and limited cover with only a melee weapon. The level of suck just hit critical mass.

“Wait!” I pulled out my Spark Pulse Emitter. I had a plan, and it was awesome. Rolling out behind cover I quickly went into SATS. This was genius. I could stop time, how could a robot even think about getting me? Just had to line up a few hits just to be safe and...

0%

I had no idea what that meant, but zero of anything was bad. The sinking feeling in my gut confirmed just how bad a plan this was. Okay. Think. Even in my stop time I could see the starting movements of his guns. Slow, but certain. My only hope was if I could get back behind the desk, and the desk could take more of a pounding as I came up with a plan. With a gulp I slid out of SATS...

And realized I wasn't fast enough.

The guns were revving. They fired before I could move. Blasts flew through the air. At me. Green globs of death a hundred a minute. Well there was no way I was getting out of this one. My body tried to dive. I just couldn't.

A black and blue blur intercepted.

Green waves of energy danced off the armour's black coating. Flare pushed me on my ass and bent over me protectively as blasts bounced off him. Each one was punctuated with a grunt. “Stupid. Idiot.” He wrapped his forelegs around me tight. “Roll.”

The two of us rolled back towards the only cover in the room. We made it, mostly alive. Flare looked in a bad way though. Parts of armour were melted through, and I could smell burning. Carefully I nudged him under the desk where there was more protection. His breaths were slow and ragged.

“Fuck.” He closed his eyes tight cough roughly. “That hurt. Always... always getting yourself killed. Fuck.” Tears stung my eyes. If he died I don't know what I'd do... “Kill that fucker... so we can... yeah. Be fine. Need to rest. Do you smell smoke?” I did my best to smile securely at him as the beams of green whittled down our safety.

You know what? Fuck this robot. It hurt my friend, and that made it personal.

“Further delay will result in termination!” Yeah, that wasn't happening. Not while I was still breathing. Maybe I was sick and tired and injured, but I was also pissed, and that gave me strength. With my body under the heavy desk I slowly rose to my hooves. The desk was heavy, but with a grunt I managed to heft its full weight onto my back. I took a tentative step forward. The desk wobbled on my back, and the weight almost made me fall. Still, there was no choice but to go forward. And do it fast.

I charged as fast I could. It wasn't fast enough. Green blasts broke through the desk and slipped past me, singeing my coat. Still I pressed on and slammed into the advanced robot. It heaved and slid back through the door.

“Obstruction Detected, Obliterating!” The revving sound got louder as it started to tear apart my barricade. That was all I needed though. Without it firing at me directly, I was able to dodge the blasts, climb over the desk, and slam the Spark Pulse Emitter into the robot's bulbous head.

Electricity surged through the metallic monster for nearly a minute before it finally went dead. I stumbled backwards from the robot, my eyes stinging from the smoke that it was emitting. My body cried out in pain from the dozens of different burn wounds over the past eighteen hours, and all I

wanted to do was to lie down and rest. Turns out office floors are comfy so I laid down and closed my eyes. Then I remembered the freaky magic in this place and opened them again...

To reveal a ghost standing over me. It was fairly easy to tell it was, in fact, a ghost by the way it was all see-through and wavy. Unfortunately, it wasn't Wildfire. Instead, a ghostly version of Baptisia stood above me, looking almost scared. I was getting tired of her.

She didn't stand there for long, as a minute later three more ghosts walked into the room. One was a slightly overweight brown stallion, the other two just guards. The stallion and Baptisia flapped their mouths at each other for way too long before the two guards flanked the former overseer and escorted her out of the room.

"What the fuck." Flare mumbled from his side of the room.

"Agreed."

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Eventually, we picked our broken asses off the floor. Flare was in rough shape, wincing at every step, but he didn't complain but to mention how much of an idiot I was. I had to agree: running out in front of a super robot was a terrible way to defeat it. We didn't bother talking about the weird vision. It made no sense, and we knew it. We also had more important things on our minds. Like not dying.

And finding Serenity. Actually, that was first.

"Enough of this..." I leaned against the wall looking around the destroyed room. "This med-x shit. Help me find my daughter."

"Find...? I know where she is." Flare's lips curled into a small smile. "I woke up before. You and Serenity were asleep, so I scooped up the filly and flew off to try and find a way out. I was gonna come back for your heavy ass, but the filly comes first. Anyway, I got cornered so I stashed her somewhere the robots wouldn't find her..." He kicked at the floor nervously. "Then I fell asleep again. Sorry."

"It's fine." I hobbled my way to the door. So much debris in the way. My weak limbs went to work clearing the way. "It's better. Smart to take Serenity. Thank you. Where is she?"

"Nearby. Asleep and safe of course. I guess we can find med-x for you after, but somepony has to carry her, and I figured you'd want to. Not that it matters now, neither of us are in any shape to carry anypony.

"I'll wake her up." His raised eyebrow begged the question. "Same way I did for you."

"Kick her?"

"... No. You know what I mean."

"You called her your daughter."

"I hate you." With a kick the rest of the desk moved out of the way. For once I was really glad I had a cybernetic leg. Unlike my other leg, it wasn't weak or shaky. It was pretty much the only thing holding me up. "I did call her that, though. Tired of games."

And Wildfire had told me I should accept her. I had known it for a long time, but I was so afraid. Despite what that dream tried to tell me though, Serenity was not Foundation. The past was the past, and nothing I could do would change it, but I had a chance to be better for Serenity. To learn from my mistakes, and give her the love she needed. So I had to do that. For her, because she deserved it.

"Really? Shit, it's about time, Silver." As if I didn't already know that.

"If she'll have me. After Karkhoof..." I left the name linger in the air as I pushed the deactivated bot out of the way. For good measure I also jabbed it again with my Spark Pulse Emitter. "Why do you keep calling me Silver?" It was a desperate attempt to change the conversation.

He followed me outside the room with a noticeable limp. "You know. It's your name. I haven't decided which I like better: Hired Storm or Silver Gun." I went to correct him, but realized at the last second that he was mocking me, so I shut up. "Really though, Silver Storm is a nice name. Why change it?"

"Because." I took a look both ways and Flare pointed one direction with his wing. Since he had the information of where he put Serenity I followed his directions. "Bad things happened with that name..."

"You mean bad things happened to *you*." This was the part where I turned to glare at his jackass face. "And if you'd notice, bad things are still happening to you. You know, name changes don't actually make your life better." He trotted up beside me and patted my back with his left wing. "Seriously, I get it. Run away from your old life, start anew. But the way that thing works is your past always catches up to you. Sooner or later, you have to deal with it. Or it'll chase you down and devour you, piece by bloody piece. It starts by tearing out the throat so you'll bleed out before--"

"Flare."

"Right, that metaphor ran away from me there." There was a slight pause. "Get it? Because... oh never mind. I mean it though, you have to accept what happened. Changing your name won't change shit." Flare was giving me advice about not running away from the past. I'll just let the irony sink in.

"Right. Got it."

We went back to walking. My EFS scanned the area as we went. We passed more than a few tempting labs, but we kept on going. As much as I wanted to explore to find out the secrets (and find med-x and healing potions), Serenity trumped those desires. At least Flare had had the good sense to take her first, and to hide her when he had been cornered. I'd have to thank him after we got to her.

As we turned the corner I noticed... something at the end of the hall, a strange staircase that seemed to call to me. Against my better judgement, I ran (well, considering how injured I was) towards it.

The stairs were made of carefully polished white marble. The small stairwell went up sixteen steps, and, while the bottom of them was fairly wide, it narrowed slightly upon rising. At the top was a pair of large wooden doors set with odd, gilded carvings. Something seemed to call me up the stairs. A powerful force was beyond it, so much so my shoulder was flaring in absolute agony.

"Hired!" Flare rushed to my side when I dropped clutching at the joint where my metal leg connected to my body. It was lightning coursing through my eyes. Fuck. "Hired, are you..."

"Yeah." I grunted. His eyebrows were furrowed as he looked down at me. "Fine... just... the magic." burned through my body. "Beyond that door." He turned to look up the stairs. "Something..." magical. Powerful. Part of me already knew what. In the observation room where we saw the video of that pony, it was taking a video of the room beyond those stairs. One more mystery. Some of the pieces to unravel the puzzle I already had, but I couldn't help but think I was missing something.

"Yeah, I figured you'd want to see that..." He attempted to help me up, but apparently forgot how much I weighed. "Uh, can you get up?"

"Yeah..." Slowly I did, trying my best to ignore the pain in my body. While the pain didn't leave, I grew accustomed to it enough to get to all fours. "Later. Where is she?"

"You passed the room I put her in; c'mon." He trotted backwards until I started to follow. From my vantage point, I could see where the MEW's had left his armour melted and slagged to his back. He didn't even complain. That stallion was tougher than I wanted to give him credit for.

I followed him to a small door that I would not have noticed had he not pointed it out. When Flare opened it, I could see it was a simple, cramped storage closet I could barely squeeze into. On the shelves to either side were a large variety of cleaning and electronic supplies, and a locked ammo box for some reason. The most important thing in the closet, however, was the small pink ball in the centre of the room. Serenity...

*...you can't blame yourself, Silver... you did everything you could...*

Flare didn't try to stop me as I limped to her body and lay to the ground beside her. Her chest rose and fell in short shallow breaths; her mane was so slick with sweat it was sticking to her face. Lowing my head I pressed it to hers and closed my eyes.

Tears stung my eyes. "I missed you, my Serenity."

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I had no idea where I was at all. For reasons I could not explain, I was standing on a hill, overlooking a city in a valley by a giant river. The river was so vast it seemed to stretch in every direction until it met the horizon. The city itself was in various states of disrepair with the ruin becoming more intense the closer it got to the giant crater in the exact centre of the city that actually glowed green. Squinting my eyes, I could see ponies moving in the distance, looking as small as ants.

A road that looked part dirt, part pre-war materials, wound from the city and towards the hill I was standing on. Beside the road was a rather large sign with writing I just couldn't make out. I really wished that my eye had a zoom function. Maybe when I got back to Dise I could ask House for one. If I got back to Dise. After all that had happened, it seemed the likelihood of returning was fading more and more.

With a resigned sigh, I turned to try and figure out where I was.

Directly behind me was a huge white house I hadn't noticed. It looked to be three stories high at least, and had to have been freshly built and painted. It looked like a picture of pre-war equestria had been crudely plastered over the wasteland. Even the lawn was a pure green, even while the dirt around it was as brown and lifeless as it had always been. Children's toys seemed to be scattered across the lawn, including a complete swing set.

"Well..." My eyes scanned the house. It was big and beautiful, like nothing I had ever seen before. I made my way slowly towards the door, but I made sure to keep my eyes watchful. Having no idea where I was obviously meant I had no idea of what dangers could be lurking.

By the time I reached the solid wooden door, I was almost positive there were no dangers. Everything around was wasteland, but the house and its lawn were positively idyllic. It was obviously a dream so I didn't bother knocking, but I did try to press my ear against the door to see if I could hear anything.

From inside I heard... something. It almost sounded like a song, but why would anypony be singing? Well, the only real way to answer that question was breaking and entering. The door opened silently and I was inside the house.

The house was actually really creepy. The living room I entered into was painted a strange silvery-grey, and all over the walls were posters of cybernetic parts laid out on great detail. The singing became more clear as I walked towards the striped white and pink couch. In front of it was a small metallic coffee table, and on that was a single picture frame. Since I was breaking in anyway, I might as well sate my curiosity.

I knelt down to get a better look. The picture was of a small pink foal whose yellow mane looked to be

just starting to grow in properly. Though she was young enough to still be in diapers the foal was leaning over a magazine depicting an artificial leg with a screwdriver in her mouth. Above her, on the frame, were the words 'She Is Always Watching Over You'. It didn't take a genius to figure out who the foal was. Part of me wished I could steal it for myself, but I was fairly sure this was a dream. Which meant no stealing baby pictures. No matter how cute.

The singing got louder, but I still couldn't make out the words. However, it was easy to tell they were coming from up the stairs on the far side of the living room. When I made my way across, I noticed the stairs were actually carpeted, and in alternating colours of green and yellow. The entire stairwell was blue, which made the whole thing look a little gaudy. About half way up it, I started to hear the words of the song.

*"It's a big world, baby~ And you're little, for a little while~"*

The hallway at the top was painted a deep blue that made the room look smaller than it was. The carpet was toxic green, and the only door (strange, that) was purple. It was cracked open slightly and I thought I saw movement on the other side. The singing got clearer as I got closer.

*"It's a big world, baby~ And you can fiddle, in your own style~"*

I carefully peeked into into the room, hoping whoever was inside wouldn't notice me. The room was light green while the carpet was designed to look like puzzle pieces of interlocking red and orange, and it was currently covered with toys. Two rectangular windows shone light from the outside on the two figures in the middle of the floor. Well, I found out who was singing.

*"In your own style~ In your own style~"*

A tall, skinny grey pony with a long, pink and yellow mane had her forelegs around Serenity and was rocking her softly as they sang. The filly's eyes were closed blissfully, and she was either asleep or getting there.

*"In your own style~ In your own style~"*

When the final note faded into the air the pink filly smacked her lips together and yawned. The larger mare petted her mane softly as Serenity got into a more comfortable position. "Would you like another song, sweetie?" The mare's voice was soft where mine was rough and gravelly. Serenity nodded. "Your favourite?"

"Yes, momma."

Well, enough of that. The door shattered at the force of my kick. That got their attention, and woke Serenity into attention. "Let my daughter go." I stomped my hoof for emphasis.

The skinny mare turned to me, her green eyes wide. "Who are you?! Get out! You aren't allowed in he—!"

"You called me your daughter!" Serenity pulled herself away from the strange pony and ran over to hug my leg. "I knew it! I love you, Momma." I... my heart fluttered, and I felt really warm and happy. It didn't last long as I felt the dream start to crash around me. That was easier than I'd expected.

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I woke up to find a certain filly doing her damndest to choke the life out of me with a hug.

"Serenity," I said, but she just squealed and hugged me harder. "What happened?" It took me forever to

break Flare's dream... "Didn't you want to stay. You looked..." She shook her head and let go of me.

"Who cares 'bout any'a that? I have'a real momma, and that's all that matters!" She smiled. "You meant it right? For real? You really wanna be my momma, cause if ya don't it's okay, I understand. Don't wanna force ya, but I'd be really happy because..."

"Serenity." She zipped her mouth shut at my words. "Yes, I'll be your foster mom. If you'll have me. I should have said so earlier, but after everything that happened... I just. Just if you want me to be, I will. I do love you, you know. I'm just not smart and fuck up how to show it." She hesitated for a minute, her brow furrowed in thought.

Then she hugged me again, and that was all the confirmation that I needed.

"Touching," Flare said after a minute. "But it should wait. We're still trapped in this fucking creepy-ass place and we have no way to get out. So..." He held the word way too long. "Let's head out. Once we're safe, you two can be all mushy and sickly sweet. Just not around me. I don't want diabetes." At that cry Serenity jumped up and started showering the pegasus with kisses. Each more deadly than the last. "No, nooo, get it off! It burns us!" Flare fell in a dramatic flare of wings and twitching legs. "So. Much. Cute."

With a final twitch, the great pegasus's head fell to the floor. The monster was vanquished once and for all, and the heroine took her rightful place standing with one hoof on his face with a look of triumph on her face.

As much as I wanted to play there with Serenity forever, we had things to do. For one thing, confront what was behind those strange doors, and then find our way out. Then we had to actually to escape the mountain, confront some Steel Rangers, let Subtlety (I missed her) have a nice long chat with High Stakes and my brother. Then eventually get back to Dise a failure and fall asleep beside Platinum Haze. That sounded nice enough to push my weary body forward.

Serenity and Flare followed after me when I walked into the hall and turned my head towards the end of the hallway where the stairs were. Even from this distance I could feel an intense heat in my metallic socket. It was painful, and familiar. As far as I was concerned, that room was the answer to what happened here, and I had to find out.

"Are you sure we should go in there?" Flare asked. "I mean, it's kinda, ya know."

"Not even sure where we are. Weren't we in a security room?" Serenity asked.

Oh, right. I quickly gave Serenity the short version of everything that had happened since we got knocked out the first time. She bobbed her head in tune with what I said, so I had to assume she understood. Considering it was Serenity, she definitely understood if I did. She was just that much smarter than I was.

So we made our way towards the double doors. The walk seemed longer than it should have, and each step sent shockwaves up my body. My body was still weak, and it had been getting weaker since I'd woken up, but I had to keep going. Since I was young, I had always able to take more than most ponies, and this was no different. In time, I'd rest, so I kept moving to get to that time. In my mind, figuring out what happened was the key to getting out of here, and then getting the long rest I needed.

So just a few more steps. We reached the sixteen stairs and looked up at the doors. It was close now, and my shoulder was in agony. I could take it though. To escape, to get free, I could take it. Now that I had Serenity with me, I was determined not to let anything stop me. Just a few more steps and I'd be there. Find the truth, and then we could escape.

"What do you think that pony is?" Serenity asked as we ascended the stairs. I had a few ideas, but

nothing solid to go on. Whatever that pony in the monitor was, it was something powerful. Maybe evil. Still, if it was behind that door, I'd have to meet it. Maybe it'd kill us, but if that was the case, it could've killed us at any time.

I really hated this place (if that wasn't clear already), but we were stuck here until we could escape. I was positive that something behind this door could help. I could feel it. So we had to try. It was the only way, and yeah it totally sucked, but what choice did I really have?

"Lets find out." I opened the door, and held my breath.

Level Up!:

New Perk!: Intense Training Level 3: Through hard work and extensive body modification you almost have an average intelligence! INT +1.

Skill Note: Magical Energy Weapons 25.

((A/N: Wow, you actually got through that chapter? I'm a bit shocked. I guess I should thank the lovely Kkat for building this world for me to defile, and my editors theBSDude, Menti, and Mint Julep for their hard work.))

## ***Chapter 20: Graveyard Of Good Intentions***

*“Half of the results of a good intentions are evil; half the results of an evil intention are good.”*

Just because you try to do good doesn't mean what you are doing is good. Ponies and zebras waged bloody war for decades, each side sure it was something they had to do, that the other side was evil, that it was the only choice. Their intentions were to save their race, but in the end they doomed it to two hundred years of standing on the edge of the abyss. Wallkirk tried to do good by building elaborate tunnels and bunkers under the city he basically ran, but they did not protect enough, and entire families were irradiated or ghouled.

Baptisia too had intended to do good, or at least I believed that was her intent. She seemed convinced that subjecting ponies to tests and trials was going to end the war. That whatever it was that she was trying to do would stop the war faster than a traditional weapon. She failed, of course, and was dragged off to be used as a test subject. A karmic way to go, but she was trying to be good, even if all she did was kill and fail.

So I felt a profound sense of connection to the mare when I opened the door to the project she thought would save everypony. I knew what it was like to try to do good, only for it blow up in your face. What we did was different, as were the results, but failing was something I could relate to. I felt a little bit of pity for the mare; even after all the ponies she'd killed, she was trying to save everypony.

At least her intentions were good. To save ponies. So much of the blood on my hooves was from actions not taken to help, but because I was a selfish pony only looking out for herself. Sure, I could make an argument that the ponies I had killed were bad, but I had still killed them out of selfishness. I had to remind myself that no matter what I saw in there, no matter what Baptisia did, she was still a better pony than I.

The room was large and empty. Its sixteen white walls seemed to shine in the bright lights. On each wall was a small number in a red circle. It went clockwise from one to eight, and then again. The ceiling was made of many glass panels with lights arranged under them in a way that made them look haphazardly placed at first, but the more I looked, the more sense the pattern made. The floor was a shallow conclave that I hadn't noticed in the video, and, except for the pony-sized stand in the centre, was made of thousands of small marble tiles in white and grey, arranged in an archaic pattern. Just looking around me, my shoulder surged with a strange energy that was not fire. The place just felt powerful and mystic.

“A megaspell chamber,” Flare said beside me, his pink eyes wide in awe. “I’ve never seen one, if you were going to ask, but, hell, look at it! If this isn't one, I'll eat my tail!” Being a stupid, non-magical earth pony, my knowledge on magic was limited. Hell, I wasn't even sure what exactly a megaspell was, except that it was like a spell, only more. Despite my lack of knowledge, it was quite clear what this place was.

“Woah,” Serenity said as she started walking the circumference of the room, seemingly studying it. “This place is so cool. Look at it.” Her horn was glowing lightly though she wasn't casting a spell. I could only guess she was thinking using her magic may help her get a feel for what the room was. Or that it looked cool. With Serenity either one was possible. “I mean, just so awesome. Ain't no super magic-y pony, but c'mon. Look at it!”

Yeah, it was impressive to look at... but that was about it. There was nothing there. Just a big fancy empty room. I had hoped to find... I wasn't even sure, but something. This was the pinnacle of the information I had found in the lab after all. This was the end result... but it was just empty. There was no big reveal. There was only a lingering sensation of disappointment.

“Don't You See!” The voice came from behind us, where the double doors leading into the lab were still open. Apparently speakers were never installed in the megaspell chamber. “There Was No Great Secret To Find. You Have Fallen Into My Trap. By Planting That Information Around I Led You To A Place You Could Not Escape.” On cue, four Protectitron MK II's rolled around the corner towards us.

“Well... fuck.”

*Please shut up.*

Wait, what was that? It was in my head, but it wasn't a voice I recognized like every time before. But upon the voices command, the two doors slammed shut and I could hear them locking.

*The voice was annoying. An earth pony though, she is interesting. An earth pony comes from beyond these hallowed halls and stands against the realities this one offers her. Many have tried, some have succeeded, but she offers an interesting challenge.*

I turned very slowly to my companions who shared looks of confusion on their faces. It was clear at that moment they could hear the voice as well. Well, at least at this point I was not going completely insane.

“Well,” Flare said, “this is nuts. You're like a weird voice thing, and you argue with the other weird voice. I just imagine you have shouting matches all over the mountain!” The voice in our collective heads seemed to shut up at that. “Or do you talk dirty to each other after you pick the bones of adventurers who dare enter.” I really shouldn't have laughed. It was just so inappropriate I couldn't help myself.

*So an earth pony has chosen her fate. The door started to unlock.*

“Wait!” Flare said when he heard. “Just kidding, really. Ha. Ha. Ha.”

The door locked again much to every ponies relief.

*An earth pony is at this one's mercy here, she best not forget it. Tell this one, why did an earth pony break away from what she wanted? Why resist?*

I turned and looked around the room to find there was no change whatsoever. Wherever this mind-talking thing was, it apparently wasn't here. Unless we couldn't see it. It'd be more than a bit disconcerting if it could go invisible too, and it didn't help that my shoulder was acting strange enough that sensing magic was basically out of the question.

And he was talking about the dreams I'd been having. Of course, I wasn't the only one to wake up from the dreams, as Flare did as well, but he still directed his question at me. So I had to answer. “They were fake. Not real. Fabrications. So I left. Why wouldn't I?” Not that I was sure how I left. It seemed accepting it was a dream and wanting out was the trigger for it breaking down. “And they were creepy. Putting me in a coffin. How would that work?” I resisted calling the strange voice a dumbass.

*An earth pony does not understand. This one did not choose your reality. An earth pony's mind builds it from your desires; this one is not privy to the nature of her reality.*

“I'm not suicidal.” Even as I glared around the room, visions of cliffs flashed in my eyes. No, I couldn't

think of that. “You did something. Stupid. This is stupid. I broke free because whatever you did failed.”

*This one created no realities. This one has been using this spell on many patients long before an earth pon-*

“Wait.” I cut off the voice. Flare and Serenity who had just been listening turned to look at me. “What is your number.”

*My number. Five-Six-Eight-Nine-Four-Seven-Seven. Five for the years in college. Six siblings. Eight times a patient committed suicide. Nine weddings patients invited me too. Four children. Seven times they whipped me when I forgot. Seven days before I could feel again...*

Even in my head I could feel the words coming out as if by instinct.

*How did you know that.*

Hah, I one upped the magical talking voice. Flare, at least, didn't understand, “The hell was that? Did you brainwash the goddess voice, Hired? What did I tell you about doing that. Don't They get pissy about it.” Flare laughed. “Seriously though, what the hell?”

“The voice... he was a test subject here. Before the war. His name was-”

*DO NOT SAY IT!*

The voice was like driving a spike through my skull. I couldn't help but drop to my knees and place my hooves over my ears in a fruitless attempt to turn it off. The voice died as soon as it came, but I was floored, as were Flare and Serenity. My daughter even attempted to put a sound barrier around her to avoid it, but you can't turn off what's in your head.

His voice came back, but softer, and less mechanical than before. *An earth pony is surprising. She feigns stupidity but catches on quickly. This one is conflicted.*

“Oh no,” Flare replied as he, for some reason, flew up to the ceiling and tapped on the glass. “She really is stupid. It's that she's so stupid, sometimes she forgets she's stupid.” He was speaking at the ceiling... did he think the pony was up there? I guess it was a better guess than I had.

“What are you?” Serenity spun in a circle, making sure to glare at everything. Just in case.

*This one is a god. A unicorn would not understand the power I possess.*

“I have a guess.” I sat up slowly. My mind still felt like liquid sludge, and my body was tearing apart at the seams, but I think I'd this figured out. This room, the information, it was all so... obvious. “This place is a megaspell chamber. Right?” Flare and Serenity nodded. They probably didn't know for sure, but I had to trust their judgement. “They were doing experiments on ponies. Here. or.” I looked at the large double doors. “Out there. I saw you. In the camera, you were here. I think.” The hairless pony with burning eyes. “You're a megaspell.” There was a pause as I looked around the room. Sixteen walls, each had a number painted on them. This was a clue... I could do this. “You were made into a megaspell...”

*Silence, this one will not stand for your accusatio-*

“Oh! I get it.” Flare looked down at me with a smug grin. “This room has sixteen sides. Numbers go from one to eight like a clock. This is a time megaspell, right? That's my guess! How many points do I receive?”

*Stop th-*

“Huh?” Serenity jumped up so we would notice her. “Can ya even do that? Attach a megaspell ta a pony, wouldn't it kill them? Magical overload and what not.” Serenity knew more about magic, so I'd to defer to her judgement.

*Are you do-*

“Oh, and maybe...” Flare paused. His wings flapped twice before he slowly glided to the ground. “Actually, I had nothing else to add, I just thought it'd be funny... Don't zap me with lightning. Please.”

There was an sound in the back of my head that sounded like a cry of exasperation. Apparently we weren't very good at listening to monologues. Maybe it was because we seemed to get one every three days or so, and we weren't in the mood for listening. Maybe because we'd spent the last day being mindfucked with and shot at. So fuck the magical voice.

*This one is surprised, but this one should not be. This one gave an earth pony too much information to lure her here. The closer an earth pony is to this one's body, the stronger this one becomes, and the easier to give her the sleep she desires.*

“But I broke out, right? You failed. You're terrible at being godly.” The god seemed to pause, so I kept talking. “I mean. I, stupid Silver, broke out. Then I broke Serenity out. She was, what? Twenty meters away from here? Maybe you aren't as powerful as you think.”

*This one has been infused with the power that has destroyed entire cities. This one will not be mocked.*

Did he have that power? I wasn't so sure. He could certainly fuck with our minds, and make our dreams adhere to our wishes, but he couldn't read minds, and the only physical presence he had was to close the doors to his room shut. He was powerful, but as strong as balefire? If Flare was right, this was some sort of time spell... would that really need as much energy as world destroying missiles? Not every megaspell had to be exactly as powerful.

A memory came back. Back in the tunnels. The orb that was there glowing with a strange power that made us hear words, and when we closed our eyes it gave us our favourite memories. This was... something similar. He was...

“You...” I said to the voice. “Wallkirk tried to drain your power...”

*This one's soul was torn asunder, and its pieces scattered. One to the deep abyss taken, another to the sky, a third north and north until there was only snow. The evil pony tore and killed me in pieces, but even a dead god can dream. Even a dead god can bear retribution. Only life can pay for life, and this one took the life of the pony whose magic tore us. This one denied the evil pony of his desires, and thus, this one was victorious, even in death.*

“He doesn't sound very dead. Dead ponies dun talk s'much. I checked.” Serenity had a good point. How could a pony who claimed to be dead be monologuing like that? On the other hoof, that orb had creepily similar powers. Creepy enough to send shivers down my spine.

*What would a unicorn call being torn asunder from the inside? Less of this one's soul is here than exists elsewhere: this is being dead. ...The invading ponies have seen a piece, haven't they? That is how they broke free. This one's lost souls are as strong as this one, but dead, less precise, but practice is practice and now it is no wonder the invading ponies were able to fight this one.*

“What’s the voice talkin' bout now?” Serenity said as she continued to walk around the perimeter of the large room. “He's annoying. He's in my head an' talkin' all funny.” Right Serenity, the voice talked funny and nopony else. “Since when are gods supposed to talk so much...”

“Now, apparently.” Flare flew down beside her on the other side of the room. “He's talking about... do you remember the tunnels?” Serenity blinked at him. “The dark ones? With the visions and shit?” Serenity's eyes went wide, and even from across the room I could see her shudder. “Yeah, exactly.”

*The invading know of the location... they must tell this one! Tell this one where these tunnels are!*

“Uh, no.” I answered. Why the hell would I give the unstable megaspell more power? Besides. He was planning on killing us anyway, and it was the only bargaining chip I had.

*An earth pony will tell this one. Or this one will*

“Kill us!” Flare jumped up. “That's what you were gonna say right? Right? Because weren't you going to do that anyway? Or was the whole luring us here just for fun? So how about we make a deal. We don't want to die, well I don't want to anyway, apparently Hired's psyche is less sure, but still. The deal. Lets say you help us escape this place of hellish-hell place and we'll go grab your soul chunk and carry it up to you. Howsabout it?”

*This one has no reason to believe you.*

“Does it matter? You know we've seen a piece, so you know, that we know, that you know, that we know where it is. If you want it back, you have to play by our rules, and our rules say get us the fuck out of here.” Flare grinned, knowing full well he had won. “Now this place is like, city-sized right? There is no way it had only one entrance, but the Steel Fucks only know of one. Show us another entrance; we leave, then come back and throw this orb at your face. It's really your only chance.

“What about the giant robots'n'stuff right outside tha door?” Serenity posed the logical question, of course. “Even if he told us how'ta get out, we're like, kinda trapped in this room. Unless it has a secret exit.” She jumped suddenly looking excited, “OH! Does it have a secret exit? That'd be so cool! C'mon, does it?”

*It does, but this one has still not decided to let you go.*

“Why not?” Asked Flare. “We already figured out the puzzle. Everypony knows the only time spell allowed you to go back in time once, and only for a few minutes, but never forward. So They tried to bond a time megaspell to you, so you could go back and forth at will and tell them how the war ended, and how to end it sooner. Of course they didn't expect this, but it was a nice thought. So we win the game!” He grinned. “And you know you can't kill us because we have the information you need, and you already said you can't read minds. So let us go. It'll be fine, really.”

So that was it. All the deaths in these labs were to create him, a failure to end all failures. Instead of looking into the future, they did little more than power up his magical abilities to some sort of extreme state and make him almost immortal. It wasn't a bad idea in theory though. Hell, if the war hadn't ended the way it had, it could have worked. Actually, when you think about it, even if he did travel to the wasteland and back (assuming he didn't die) that would be enough to possibly end the war before everything had gone to shit. If the ponies, zebras, minotaurs, and whoever else knew the consequences, it might have been enough to stop all of this. Baptisia was almost a heroine, and all the death she caused would have been worth it. Instead, she was carted away like the criminal she was, and experimented on. At least, I think that was her fate. The memory I got had been very vague, most likely altered.

Of course, he'd said before he couldn't put specific memories in our heads. But that was exactly what he'd done, twice! Well, three times, if you include that dream I had. So he was lying to us, or I misunderstood. Still, I was fairly sure he couldn't read our thoughts, only project them into our heads. I guess if I was going to convince him to let us go I was going to have to put that to the test.

The scarier thought was if any of this was real. If he could make us see things, and dream things that weren't ours, how did we know this whole thing wasn't just an elaborate dream and he was sucking life from us, or whatever he did. There was no way to be sure, was there? I could only really guess and hope I wasn't getting duped. The thought made my heart beat faster than it had been, and considering how it was already going crazy that couldn't be good. Just needed to calm my thoughts. Take a deep breath.

"You killed them all didn't you?" My voice cut through the silence. "This facility. The dead ponies you..."

*They were dead before this one touched their minds. This one gave them peace instead of horror for their last hours.*

"All of them. None could have survived?" My voice felt raspy and shaky.

*None. The evil pony that designed this place did not understand. The radiation would not have gotten into the heart of the mountain, but this place only had enough food for six months. Even if most had died, it would last five years, and by then the blanket of radiation would kill them if they stepped towards the exit. This one did a horrible thing to save them from a worse fate.*

"So you killed them."

*Ended their suffering. This one is evil, and you can expect evil things from it. An earth pony would do well to remember it. This one is a monster.*

"You're not. You're a pony. Monsters don't have names."

*This one has no name.*

"Simple Heart. You told me to remember. So I did." I think he did, but I was gambling on his morality here, if he had any left. What happened to him was beyond words, and he had a god complex to be sure, but he was still a pony. If he could see that, maybe he'd help us escape.

The voice in our head was silent.

"How did you know his name, Hired?" Flare grabbed Serenity and flew over beside me. "Because if he kills us over this, I'd like to know what to curse."

"Use my name." I smiled grimly. Not that I knew what a grim smile looked like. "Just to be safe."

The pegasus nickered and reached out a hoof to pat me on the back. He stopped when he noticed a lot of my back was a mess of unhealed burns from the robots. "Right. I can do that. How about it, Serenity? You wanna curse your momma with your dying breath?"

"Ya huh. Sounds like fun. Can I, Momma?"

"Go ahead," I smiled. "Why not? I deserve it." Finally the voice started to talk again. He must have been tired of our banter.

*That is not this one's name. This one has decided to let the invading ponies die.*

Oh, hell no! I charged towards the centre of the the room. The epicness of it was almost cut short when I nearly slipped on the polished white marble, but I found my balance and kept going. I could hear him in my head, telling me to stop, but I already figured this part out. When I reached the centre I turned around and bucked with what little strength I'd left. My hooves connected to something.

The impact shook my body, but I didn't move. I just stood there with my hooves against the invisible force. In my mind, I heard the voice grunt. When I turned my head to see what I had hit, there was nothing there. Until nothing flickered. There was a brief flash, and before me stood a pony with a coat, but without a face. He stared at me with eyes like suns. I felt my shoulder flare up in pain from the pure magic that engulfed this pony but, I did not back down.

In a fluid turn, I grabbed my shotgun from my pack and pressed against his faceless head.

*This one is a god.* His eyes flashed as the words struck like daggers in my skull. *Do you think you can kill a god?*

“Does an Earth Pony think she can kill a god.” I corrected him. His lapse in speaking style only confirmed to me that I was scaring him. “You said it yourself, 'Even a dead god can dream.' Which means you can also die.” My shotgun cocked. It was empty, of course, but he couldn't read my mind so he had absolutely no way of knowing that. “I've tried appealing to your pony side. I've tried bargaining. I've tried talking. I'm tired of talking. I've been lectured by better ponies. And for better reasons. You will help me and my daughter leave. Or I'll kill you. We'll still die. But so will you.”

*An earth pony cannot be stupid enough to threaten this one.*

“Oh, I can.” Threaten him with an unloaded gun no less. “I've been shotgunned in the face. But the pony that shot me missed. The goal is to hit the head. The brain. I won't make that mistake. It'll only take one shot to end you.” At that moment I was positive I was going to die. I was threatening a two-hundred-year-old abomination with an empty gun. But I didn't waver. As weak as I felt, as dizzy and nauseous, I'd still promised Serenity I'd get her through. And I'd promised Wildfire I'd survive. If not for me, than for the ponies who (for reasons I couldn't understand) needed me.

*This one...*

“Had three seconds.” My teeth dug into the handle of the weapon. “I wasn't kidding. You're a pony. I'll find your soul for you. I don't want to kill you. So don't make me. Let us go and you have my word.”

There was a long second of silence.

*This one will help you...*

There was a collective sigh from the three of us. My ruse worked. Thank Celestia that even gods fear death.

*This room has an emergency exit. In case the spell went wrong. An elevator that leads to the tram system. At the bottom of the elevator there is a map. It will list all exits. Is this sufficient?*

“Yes.” I sighed. “Yes.” Even though I took a step back I didn't put my shotgun away. Even if it was useless, I had to keep up appearances. “I promise. I'll find the orb. Bring it back.” If he wanted to he could wait until we left and then mind rape us some more, but I had to trust him. Even if it was only because it was the only real option we had. So I rolled the dice and prayed.

*The wall opposite the doors was designed to be easy to break. Beyond that is the exit. This one will not stop you.*

I gave a slight nod to Flare. He saluted, then flashed through the air and slammed into the wall so hard it turned into dust. A few second later, he came out and waved a wing of approval. There was our best chance for leaving. Very carefully, I circled around the megaspell pony, keeping my shotgun trained on him. Ever so slowly I backed up towards the exit with Serenity following beside me.

“Sorry.” I said honestly to Simple Heart. “Really. You deserve better.”

I turned and ran into the elevator beside my companions. It was a rather large ugly metal thing that seemed to be designed to hold at least two dozen ponies. Maybe more. The metal grate of a door slammed shut when we all entered, and I was very glad I couldn't see down.

“Going down.” Flare pressed the only button on the control panel and we started to descend.

I dropped the shotgun and went to say something but couldn't. A laugh just started to build in my chest, and I couldn't contain it. Something about this whole situation was so funny that my whole body shook with laughter. Flare stood over me and I tried to stifle the giggle long enough to say something. It didn't work because he fell on his rump and started laughing too. It was just too much. This whole situation. Serenity joined us too, because apparently we were hilarious.

Eventually we got control enough to speak, but it was still hampered by giggles.

“Did you just... threaten a fucking god?” Flare said trying to contain himself.

“With an empty gun.” I kicked the shotgun sending it spinning across the elevator floor. “We should be dead.”

“Oh Hired, words cannot express how much I hate you, and how much I love you right now.” Flare laughed again as we continued to descend into the depths of the facility. Maybe Simple Heart was just playing us, but it was so worth it even if he was.

The elevator lurched, and for a split second I thought I was falling. There was a look of horror on my face, before relief washed it away. That moment was enough though. We weren't out of the water yet, not by a long shot. So I couldn't get comfy, the worst was still yet to come. Who knew what awaited us in the bottom of the facility.

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The darkness was all-encompassing, and not even the light of my pipbuck and eye could stop it. It was like a great black void in that sucked in light and gave nothing in return, and the longer I stared into it the more I felt it staring back at me. When I was told the elevator lead to the tram line I'd expected that it would be, you know, lit, and actually lead to a platform. Except when we got to the bottom we walked out over some tracks in the middle of the tunnel. Thankfully Simple Heart was right in one respect; there was a map just outside the elevator.

It was surprisingly helpful. The map gave us a lovely 'you are here' icon, and showed routes to the major areas in the facility. There was a section for 'Weapons Manufacturing,' 'Stable-Tec Storage,' 'Offices,' 'Magical Experimentation,' 'Mechanical Experimentation,' 'Training,' and a few labelled with 'Exit.' The closest exit was near the storage area, so I mentally crossed that one off and looked for the next one. It seemed to be right inside the manufacturing area... oho! I got the brilliant idea of stopping off there before leaving. More guns could only be a good thing, and if nothing else we could sell them later.

Serenity was very helpful and tore the map off the wall before rolling it up and storing it away. Magic really was useful in situations like these.

“Dark, creepy tunnels,” Flare remarked, seeming almost unimpressed. “What's the likelihood of this

one being filled with ghouls?" Serenity seemed to shudder at that. It had been a while, but the memory of killing that pony must have still hurt. Not everypony could be cold about it like me, and I was glad in a way, that she disliked it. "Oh, the flashbacks." Being on the ground, having the life choked out of me, wondering if we'd ever escape, the feeling of hopelessness... oh yes, the flashbacks.

"Let's just go." I pushed past him, deeper into the darkness.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Flare followed after me with a weaker version of his trademark grin. "Did you find another exit?"

"Yes. There was a factory too. The exit is in there. We're going to get big guns. Get out of here. And torch High Stakes and my brother. If they haven't left." There was a sparkle of amusement in Flare's eyes.

"Alright! I love this plan! Bloody vengeance and what not!" Sometimes it was really hard to tell if he was mocking me or not. Everything he did was in such a Flare way it made it very open to interpretation. "Lets go kill some folk. After we survive whatever horror is waiting for us down this dark tunnel of course. They better not have done anything with Bunker Buster; I miss her." I could sympathize with that. Poor Subtlety... but that gave me a thought.

"Serenity, do you still have your gun?"

Serenity looked up from the rock she had been studying. "No, I..." She blinked. "Wait." Turning around, she dug into her bag for a second before producing her zebra pistol. With a slight blush she said, "Um, I forgot about it..." I had, too, so I couldn't blame her. After the Crimson Hoof took mine and Flare's weapons, they didn't even check Serenity, and, in the commotion of us being dragged off and me nearly dying, it had slipped our collective minds.

"It's fine." I ruffled up her mane a little bit, and noted how much she really needed to take a bath. "Take care of it for now. I might need to borrow it, if we find anything that needs be shot, that is."

"You're not really gunna shoot my uncle, are you?" Her, what? Oh, did she mean my brother? I wasn't really sure why she should care about that. Sure, in some strange, convoluted way they were related, but he was still a huge asshole who didn't deserve to be cared about like that. The only time they had interacted was when he had helped chain her up again, so why would she care?

"Maybe." I sighed and kept walking in the dirty darkness. "He's not a good pony... he wanted to kill me." He used to play tag with me, and when we wrestled, I'd always let him win. "He went down the wrong path. He works with raiders." He used to read to me when mom was busy, and let me borrow his toys. "I tried to save him, and he threw it in my face." They took him away from me. "I..." My voice cracked.

"Momma, are you cryin'?"

"No." I kept walking as tears stung my good eye. It was nothing, just bad memories I couldn't get rid of. Well, the memories were good, but what they represented was just bad. Not that it mattered. In the end, it was going to come down to the two of us and a gun, and when that happened, I had to be the strong one. After everything he'd made me suffer through, after the years without him even trying to contact, only for me to find him like that... No. He had to die, but only if he made me kill him.

No pony spoke for a while after that, and I couldn't blame them. After everything that had happened, I was sure they were avoiding conversation so I wouldn't have yet another mental breakdown. Not that I could really blame them. I felt like I was standing on the edge. What I really needed was a day to rest, where I could just process all the horrible shit that went down, just some time for my brain to reset. Instead, I kept getting pushed closer to the cliff, and at this point, it was just going to be one more push

before I fell.

Of course, me going insane wouldn't exactly be a long fall.

I wasn't as bad as when I had started, though. At least, I think I was getting better at some things. Somehow I had managed to break into my friends dreams and help them come back to reality. Not to mention survive a deadly maze of giant robots while sick, and then talk down a deadly god-thing. So despite all my failings I was managing to survive, and to help my friends get through it all too. So that was something. Maybe I was borderline insane, and probably a med-x junkie, but I was surviving and growing. Also, I was getting really sappy.

The tunnel kept extending further, and the more we walked, the more it felt like we weren't making very much progress. It didn't help that I kept stumbling on the dirt floor. It wasn't made for ponies to walk on and was covered in holes and rocks, and I was tired and sore and weak. If only we could find a place to rest then we could move on. Flare looked like he could use some rest too. His Enclave armour was still partially melted onto his back, and he seemed to wince at nothing as we walked.

The only pony who seemed really ready to keep going was Serenity. Thankfully, she had been asleep for most of the time in the lab and hadn't gotten shot up like Flare and I. Mind you, if she had been awake, then maybe we would have been able to make use of her gun, seeing as she was the only pony who was armed. It probably wouldn't have done much good against those metal monsters, but it would have been something.

"So I've decided," Flare said as the tunnel started to take a gradual turn, "I blame Curly Fries." I looked down at Serenity to make sure we were still going the right way. When she nodded I turned back to Flare who was grinning in my pipbuck light.

"Really, Flare? Knight Curly Fries?" What did he do? Sure he was an ass a while ago, and then got bitch slapped and kicked out of the Steel Rangers, but that didn't have much to do with our current predicament.

"The way I see it is that if Curly hadn't gone and get himself kicked out of the Steel Fuckwads, then he'd still be with them. He'd obviously be assigned to the mission in this stupid centre, and his failure to be anything other than a joke would counter Blackwater's over the top evilness. So we would have been able to escape as they butted heads, and wouldn't have had to go through this at all."

"That..." I blinked. "Almost made sense." Almost, not quite, but it was a valiant effort. Hell, I almost wanted to agree. It seemed a lot easier to blame Curly Fries every time something went wrong.

"Well, I tried." He flapped his wings once. "What's that?" He waved a hoof in front of us. Now that he mentioned, it the light of my pipbuck did seem to be hitting something a little further into the tunnel.

The object slowly came into view and we couldn't have been more lucky. Filling the majority of the tunnel was a large structure of metal and wood, standing perfectly still on the rails that ran through the centre of the tunnel. The vehicle seemed to be fairly open, with a ceiling and floor, but no walls except for safety railings, support beams, and a damaged windshield in the front that glinted in the light from my pipbuck.

"A tram! Cool!" Serenity ran over the dirty ground and managed to jump onto the back of the vehicle. A few seconds later, the back railing opened and a set of emergency stairs came off the back. Standing at the top of the stairs, Serenity struck her best heroic pose. "Please come aboard."

With a half chuckle, I climbed up the stairs. The tram was smaller than I had expected, with a series of small wooden benches in a single cart. There was an engine at the front of the tram, near the glass window and what must have been the drivers seat. Unfortunately, many of the seats were still occupied

by skeletons. Simple Heart's last legacy. With a simple look between me and Flare, we got to work clearing out the bones.

When we were done, I sat down. Why had we even done that? It wasn't like we could even make the thing move. Whatever was powering the other parts of the facility left the tram lines in darkness, so what good was it to clear it out? It just seemed like the right thing to do.

“We should rest here,” Flare said, lying on a bench. “I need rest. You need rest. Serenity needs rest.”

“No, I don't!” Serenity, to nopony's surprise, found her way to the engine. Standing over it, she undid her saddlebags and laid them beside her. “Got plenty'a sleep in that stupid dream. You two can rest, though. I'll stand guard.” I gave Serenity a look. Or rather *the* look. “Oh, c'mon, Momma. You need sleep, an' Flare does too. I 'ad more'an both'a ya, and I didn't get shot at, like, at all. You two sleep, and I'll work on this engine. Bet I can get it working by the time you wake up.”

“How, exactly?” I punctuated with a yawn. I couldn't really disagree with her on the “needing rest” part. “You need tools and...”

She pulled out a series of wires, gems, and tools from her saddle bag. Apparently, she was a lot more prepared than I gave her credit for. “Always keep tools on me, an' I scavenged some robots when we first got locked in here, remember?” Oh yeah. “Ain't really my field'a expertise, but it seems simple enough. Some trial an' error'll get it fixed in a jiffy. If anything goes wrong, I'll wake you and Flare, okay?”

Flare laughed a little bit. “Sounds like a deal. But what if Mr. God Complex tries to do his dream-invading thing again? Could be trouble.” That was a concern, but if he was going to do that despite our little talk, we were as good as dead anyway.

“He could even if we're awake. Remember.” I rested my head on the floor. “Serenity.” I looked up at her. The force of her smile made the dark tunnel somehow brighter. “I trust you. If anything happens, wake us.”

My daughter saluted me before turning back to her work. Before I closed my eyes, I caught a look from Flare that made it clear he wasn't so sure it was a good idea. I did my best to comfort him with a look, and it seemed to work. Just to make sure, I said. “If you get sucked into a dream. I'll kick you out again. Beating you up was fun.”

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My dreams were the pillar of normality, and for that I was glad. Of course, for me 'normal' dreams often include haunting memories, dark shadows, lengths of rope, dripping of blood, and the smell of smoke, all tied together with a feeling of dread that lasts for hours after I wake up. I guess it means something when my 'abnormal' dreams are much more bearable than my normal dreams, but you can only trudge through so much shit before it starts caking on your hooves.

I fell asleep to the subtle sounds of Serenity tinkering and woke up a few hours later. My whole body felt as weak as a kitten, and my head was pounding against my skull, but I couldn't afford to show weakness. Even if I felt like I was about to vomit... again.

“Should be sleepin', Momma.” Serenity said as she took her head out of the engine. “You need'a sleep.”

“Can't.” Which was the truth. At that point I was so sore, it was seriously going to impede my chances of catching a few winks.

“Tha's fine.” She floated a few wires over. “Stupid thing is more difficult than ah thought...” She muttered to herself before looking over at me again, her grey eyes almost glowing in my pipbuck light. “Was it a normal dream? Or did he break his word like I figured he would? Ah don't trust'im.” She

frowned. "He lied; I can still hear her singing."

"Maybe he can't control it." The little filly scrunched up her face at that but let me talk. "His powers might be out of his control. Or getting there. Me and Flare... we kept seeing visions. From the past. No way he did it on purpose. And... I dreamed I was here."

"Whaddya mean? Ya are here. That ain't nothin' special." She giggled. "Not makin' any sense anymore."

"I mean. I was here, but in the past." She sat down as a little smile found itself on her muzzle. "I met a pony in some cells in the labs, and he was a bit crazy. But, he gave me his name, and his story. Simple Heart."

"Ain't that whatcha called the crazy-voice pony?"

"Exactly... and he didn't know how I knew. So maybe, he's been alive so long his powers are getting out of control." I closed my eyes and sighed. "It's only a guess. But... if the orb could do similar things without a brain, maybe he's not as in control as he wants us to think."

Something warm snuggled up against my body. With a smile I put a leg over Serenity as she said, "Dunno why Flare calls you dumb." She nuzzled my leg. "Sometimes you're dense, but you're awesome when ya try real hard." With my eyes closed, I slowly stroked my filly's mane. It was very greasy, but this wasn't the best place to suggest a bath.

"No, I'm not..." I sighed. "After Karkhoof. And everything else... I *am* dumb. You are too for accepting me."

"I'm still upset about that..." Serenity's voice broke and she had to take a second to compose herself. "But... we all messed up. It sucked, but you're not a bad pony. Just have something'ta make up for." She sniffled. "What matters is that yer my momma, and you love me. Everything else can be worked out later..."

"Sometimes you're too mature." I brushed her mane with my hoof. "Not usually though." She said. "I do love you though. I hate it when you get hurt, and I couldn't imagine living without you anymore. You're a little bit of purity in a world of suck, and I would fight the whole wasteland and all their guns if it meant keeping you safe."

"You're a sap." I rolled my eyes. "You look sick, too..."

"Something like that." With Serenity curled up beside me, my body was bubbling with so much motherly love I barely noticed the symptoms... at least, I wish that was true. Truth be told, she did nothing to make me feel better, and each second it felt like I was slipping further and further into the abyss. "I'll be fine. How's the engine?"

With a grumble she crawled out from under me and over to the engine, poking at it. "Stupidly annoying, and stupid. At this rate, we could'a walked the distance."

"But that'd be boring." I opened my eyes and struggled into a sitting position. "Right?" She smiled and nodded. "And it's good practice. And we need rest. And I'm lazy and don't want to walk."

"You ain't lazy when ponies need'ta be beat up." Usually I beat up ponies when my life was at stake, and generally speaking that was not an environment conducive to laziness. "But I guess that's important," she continued. There was a frown on her muzzle and she gave the engine a small kick.

It was upsetting to see Serenity annoyed like that. I know how much she wanted to help us, and how frustrating it must have been not able to do it when she got the chance. My mind started going through ways I could help to cheer her up, and it got stuck on one particular. Back in her dream, the pony

posing as her 'mother' was singing a song. While I was not a good singer by any measure, I just couldn't get the thought out of my head.

So, against my better judgement, I opened my mouth and started to sing what I could remember.

*It's a big world, baby. And you're little, for a little while."*

My voice was raspy, and hoarse, but I was trying.

*It's a big world, baby. And you can fiddle, in your own style."*

The last note hung in the air and reverberated through the darkness. For the life of me I couldn't remember the rest of the words to the song. I hoped it was enough though... Serenity seemed to have stopped in her place. Slowly she turned around to face me, tears welling in her eyes. She opened her mouth, and looked like she was about to speak for a second. Instead she turned back around to hammer harder at the engine.

I guess the song didn't work. Must have been my voice, it was too rough to hold a note.

"Silver, you shouldn't torture cats." Flare said groggily. Turning my head to him, I could see he was slowly getting to his feet... I didn't really understand what he said about cats though. I liked cats, and would never hurt one. It must have been part of his dream. "Any progress?"

"Almost," Serenity said in a hushed tone. "Almost."

"Good! Earth ponies and unicorns are so slow." He beat his wings once. "If I was alone I'd be out of here like that." He gave the floor a sharp stomp. "But I'll wait for you slowpokes."

"How's your back?" I asked from my heap on the floor. For some reason saying the words made me taste bile in the back of my throat.

"Crispy, and in constant agony. I've had worse though. Did I ever tell you about the time I was flayed?" Wait, what? I shook my head. "Well, it was when I was barely older than Serenity here. Okay, I was about five years older and had just got my first position. My patrol was hit by raiders and I got hit in the wing and crashed landed... in a raider den." Serenity gasped. "You're telling me! Luckily these weren't the Smooth-Tongue-style super raiders, just your regular dumb ones. They couldn't even get me out of my armour, never mind shoot through it. They really wanted me out though. After a lot of trial and error, they managed to tug off a piece of leg armour." He tapped his right foreleg with his left.

"What happened!" Serenity blurted out, no longer paying attention to her work.

The pegasus bit his lip and grimaced a bit. "The predictable. They took a long sharp knife," he made a knife sound, which was surprising as knives don't usually make sounds. "And started peeling away at the skin so I could see the muscle underneath." Serenity icked and looked away as if it would stop her from hearing. "It was... so painful The raider was taunting me too, even though I couldn't hear the words through the pain. I could see though, and as soon as he got too close..." The scorpion tail of his enclave armour snapped out and pierced the side of the tram. "Through the eye."

"That's so gross." Serenity whacked something in the engine.

"Hey, that's the truth for you. So don't worry about this wound, okay?" Flare smiled as he got to his hooves. "How long before we're ready to go, Chief?"

Serenity smacked the engine one more time. There was a small humming emanating from the machine before it turned into a full blown whirring as the whole platform started shaking making Serenity give a sharp yelp of surprise. Carefully she looked around to make sure no one heard her before announcing proudly, "Got it working! Just like I knew I could!"

“Good job, Serenity.” She beamed all the more proudly as she hit a button and the tram started its slow steady pace.

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“And that's how you can integrate a pipbuck's spell matrices into a cybernetic eye, see it was simple that they did.” I stared at Serenity as her words went in one of my ears and spewed out the second without taking a stop between them. She may have been trying to teach me something important, but it just wasn't sticking. No matter how hard I tried.

My head bobbed up and down as I feigned understanding. “Uh, yeah. Totally. The magical energy... stuff.” Our eyes met for a second and I thought she was about to call me out for not understanding. Instead she just giggled and turned to look out the tram window. Thank Celestia.

I hadn't really moved since the tram had started, and I was okay with that. My body wasn't getting better very quickly, and nausea seemed to be a permanent part of whatever I was experiencing. The only time I really moved was to scratch one of the constant itches. Mostly my hind legs. I knew my companions were worried about me, it was sort of obvious by their faces, but they were kind enough not to ask. Just let me stew in my self-created weakness. Maybe Flare was right about the Med-X.

No part of me wanted to admit it because of what that would mean, but I couldn't deny it any longer. My only saving grace was that if I was addicted, it would be a new addiction so the symptoms of withdrawal wouldn't be as bad, and it'd be easier to break. Of course, that's only if I knew anything about drugs, which I didn't. And of course being shot at by, like, a thousand deadly robots with laser guns. That couldn't have helped anything at all. At least it seemed like those things weren't active down here.

Cue the world fucking with me in three, two, one.

“Did You Really Think Hiding In The Tunnels Would Save You From My Sight! I See All! I Hear All!” The voice on the intercom said. At first, I had thought the intercom voice was the pony making the weird things happened, but after what happened upstairs I was less sure.

“Oh!” Serenity perked up a bit. “Can I ask a question then?” She didn't wait for an answer. “How come upstairs is all bright'n'shiny, but here has no power?” As usual, my daughter asked the best questions. If in a slightly strange and rude way.

“W-what! You Cannot Ask Questions Of Me!” The voice paused. “I Will Answer So You Are Less Ignorant In Death Than In Life. The Megaspell Generator Powering This Facility Has Nearly Run Out Of Energy! As Per Protocol, Energy Has Been Directed To Critical Areas.” That made sense for the part of the facility used for housing rebuilding supplies, and the labs around Simple Heart... but what about the cameras, speakers, and all the areas near the entrance? Unless the voice lit those areas to lull adventures deeper into the heart of the facility... Did I just have a smart thought?

“Wait.” Flare, who had been remarkably quiet up till then, looks up and asked. “Why would you use weapons to power-”

“FOOL!” So said the electronic voice. “Megaspells Are Not just Weapons. The First Was A Healing Spell! Any Spell Can Be Amplified!” Like a time spell. Which begged the question: why did Flare ask that? He clearly knew that megaspells didn't have to be weapons.

Flare started laughing, and confirmed my suspicions. He was up to something. “I know.” There was that grin on his muzzle. “Do you know how many ponies know what the first megaspell was? Wasteland ponies I mean, because they teach history above the clouds, and even my remnants have enough information to know that. Regular ponies don't though...” oh, I understood. “So. You're either

an uncannily smart wastelander from a stable, and I don't believe that for a second, a pegasus, a ghoul, or something that's not a pony.”

“What Is The Meaning Of This?”

Flare completely ignored it. “So I'm going to chalk off no for a wastelander who can manipulate the facility's controls without the password, and chalk off pegasus for the same reason and because I know for a fact no pegasus alive, except me, has been in deep enough to find controls.” He paced as he ranted. “Now you can't be a ghoul from here because of Mr. Crazy thoughts. Now, you could be a ghoul from stable whatever that had the password, but the password was designed to be deleted when life signs vanish, so you'd have lost access.” He stomped a hoof. “So what the actual fuck *are* you?”

“I... I Don't Have To Subject Myself To These Questions!”

“Oh! Can I guess?” Serenity seemed to think it was a game. Or was just messing with the voice, I couldn't tell which. “A mechanical robot AI who wants to turns us into your minions? Right? Right?” I just shook my head at her. It could have been an AI, but I doubted very much it wanted to turn us into robots. Of course, if it did, I already had a head start.

“My guess is another megaspell gone awry, so it fights with the other magical pony for control.” Flare said. I wasn't so convinced of that.

“No... Not A Megaspell... Enough! I Have Had Enough! You Will Die!”

“Thanks, Flare. You pissed off the voice. The robot-controlling voice.” Flare shrugged at my words and just smirked. “I hate you, Flare.” I didn't really hate Flare, but at that moment it was something close. Luckily for him, I was feeling too weak to actually do anything but lie around until I had to start walking again. With the way the tram was moving, it'd be a while. Unless the voice actually had plans to blow us up or something. Which would be par the course in this fucking place. Just to be safe, I lifted my head up and scanned around with my EFS.

I didn't have to look much, for as soon as I stared forward two blips appeared in my vision. They were red, of course. And we were heading right at them. So much for the tram actually getting us anywhere. Just when we got it working, the god of the facility decided we needed to fight more crazy robots.

“Shit.” I growled stumbling to my hooves. “Serenity. Dead ahead.” My legs shook under my weight. When did walking become so difficult. I stumbled forward as Serenity peered into the darkness.

“Don't see anything.” Serenity mumbled. Flare nodded his agreement. Serenity got the engine working, but apparently not the headlights.

“Wait...” I squinted into the darkness trying to work my bleary eyes into seeing the threat. After a few seconds of nothing, my vision whooshed and half my vision took a green tinge that allowed my sight to pierce the darkness. As I thought, two robots stood in our way. My eye tagged them with a purple box and the name 'Protectitron mk 2'. “Hit the brakes.” Serenity tilted her head at me. “Just do it.”

“Right, right.” Serenity hit the brakes and we started sliding to a stop. Luckily, we weren't going that fast or we would have ploughed right into them and they would have shot us the fuck up. “What was that all about?” Serenity looked up at me with a pout (my vision turned off the green, darkness-seeing thing when I turned back to Serenity). She really liked the tram after she got it working.

“There are-” My statement was cut off by a gasp as a bolt of green energy slammed into the windshield, melting it. “That!” When a few dozen more green bolts slammed through in rapid succession we all collectively decided to get the fuck out of there.

Unfortunately I was not in a running mood, so the others had to match my slowly shaky hobbling. The only reason we survived at all was because the tram blocked us mostly from view once we got off the

back. Not that it left us with many options. The tunnel was long, and mostly devoid of any place to hide. We could run back the length of the tunnel, but at the speed I was hobbling, the machines would catch up all too quickly.

“Any ideas?” I gasped as the machines roared behind us, spitting out green death.

“We could die.” Flare looked back. What was once darkness was now growing green from the constant barrage of magical bolts. “But I do so like living. Death is so terribly final.” I would have smacked him a little, but I wasn't feeling up to it.

After pushing my sweat-soaked mane out of my eyes, I tried to turn my night light on again so I could look for a place to hide. You know, it would have been really helpful if House actually told me about that feature before. It seemed like he hid half of the shit my new cybernetics did. It was probably a test.

There was something in sight, thank Celestia: a small door off the side of the tunnel. It must have been a maintenance room or something like that. Regardless, I made a beeline for it, and my companions followed after me. If only because I didn't really give them a choice in the matter. If nothing else, the room would bottleneck the robots to one at a time, and that might be enough for us to kill them. Not likely, but it was the only chance I saw in our condition. Or, really, my condition.

“How did you see that?” Flare asked when we reached the door. I tried to answer but when I opened my mouth I taste bile. “I mean, fuck, can you see in the dark or something?” The answer was yes, but I made no move to speak. My stomach was heaving uncomfortably, and I did not want to take chances.

When I tried to open the door though it locked. So much for Flare's lesson about not all doors being locked. Thankfully there was a terminal beside it. It gave me the usual password spiel, and a few clicks of my pipbuck made the door click, giving us access. I tore open the door with all the strength I could muster and looked around the room.

It was much bigger than had I expected it to be. The room was oddly shaped with a small hallway leading to a large room that stretched out perpendicularly. It had a mattress thrown in the corner beside a counter with a sack on it. The room was fairly cluttered with boxes, and other junk getting in my way. What caught my eye most was the trash can near the mattress and counter. I ran over there as fast as I could and puked my guts out into it. That did not make me feel much better so I collapsed onto the stained mattress and tried to stop my head from spinning.

It didn't really work well, so I closed my eyes. My ears painted the picture for me. I heard Flare shouting something. Sounds of plasma fire washed over me, and the sound of a door clicking closed blocked them out partly. Hoofsteps came towards me, one tripping over a box, spilling its contents. They voiced words of concern but I could barely hear them over the pounding in my head. I just need it to go away, then I could help. It'd be so simple.

“Hired...” I heard the voice that time. It was mostly masculine, but soft to the ear. Flare's voice. “Hired, are you okay?” There was nothing I could do in response. My body felt weaker than it ever had, and I wasn't even sure why. No... at that point I knew why, even if I didn't want to admit it. Denial would not save me this time.

“Momma, c'mon. Get up.” That was a softer, younger voice that was prone to squeaking when stressed. Something poked into my ribs, and I grunted a response. I would be fine, I just needed to rest for a little. Between the burns and the withdrawal, I wasn't up for fighting robots right now. It didn't seem like I had a choice though. They were coming. I could hear their guns moving close. The door wouldn't hold.

“Hired...”

“Go without me.”

“I would, but they're kind of blocking the door, and we need our meat shield.” There was a soft smack and I heard Flare chuckle. “Ow, that hurts Serenity. But, really, we need you. You can't give up here, not now. Not after what we've been through.” I wasn't giving up... Okay, maybe I was giving up a little. But at this point I was just slowing them down, Flare could grab Serenity, zip past, and escape without me. Serenity was all that mattered anyway. She was all that ever mattered.

“Take her, fly-”

“We'll be shot down, we need you, you big stupid oaf. Now get your ass up!”

“Momma is not a mule,” Serenity said indignantly. “C'mon. We can take'em. I have my gun, you can grab Momma's Spark Pulse Emitter.”

“Yeah... I'll do that, go wait in the hallway, yell and come back if they try to break in.” I heard the filly diligently run off to her duty. “Hired, oh Hired, you should have listened.” There was a shuffling sounds and something dropped to the ground beside my bed. “You're lucky we stumbled on what looks to be a smuggling hideout.” I felt a sharp pain jab into my shoulder.

There was sweet relief at last. It washed over me like a splash of cool water in a desert. I let out a contented sigh as the drug worked its way into my system. It didn't alleviate all my ills though, but it was something. If not enough. My whole body seemed to ache for more, just one more.

“Stay here, but don't dawdle.” I felt clumsy hooves fiddle with my collar pockets. “Once that starts working, we'll need you. Here.” He floated something down and attached it to my pipbuck. “An audio-log, or something. Once that's over, you should be ready. I'm a fair fighter, but I'm no Hired Gun, so we need you. Don't let your new daughter down.” There was a shuffling of hooves and boxes as the pounding in my head subsided. The recording Flare gave me started up.

*Hey Baptisia, here's the recording you wanted. A voice spoke from my pipbuck. So you know it's us, or whatever. The stuff you wanted was easier to procure, the receipt is on the counter. The count is twenty vials of Med-X, thirteen counts of Rage, five Hydras, and one container of Buck. Thanks for the easy job, by the way. You have no idea how hard certain gems are to find, not to mention Flux. IMP was by far the worst. There was a chuckling sound.*

I opened my eyes to see the bag of drugs lying on the ground in front of me. Any one of those things could have helped me. The Med-X Flare gave me just wasn't enough, not after everything that happened. My body was still so sore, and I felt weak.

*I would ask what you need these for but... I get the feeling you won't answer. I've heard rumours of shit going down, and I hope you're safe. If not, I hope you get this message. You know, we've never met one-on-one, but it feels like I've known you all my life. You're a good pony, and this business venture has been profitable. So stay safe.*

A vial of Med-X jutted out of the bag, so close. Reaching forward, I wrapped my mouth around it and stabbed myself with it. The sharp pain was mixed with sweet relief. It was good, it was enough. The sounds of gunfire filled my ears, drowning out the recording.

*...want starmetal. Sorry I couldn't get it, that shit is rare and kept hidden. If I had more time... but it looks like we're out of time anyway. If it means anything, I thought you did good.*

Something else fell out of the bag when I took the Med-X. It looked like a three syringes tapped together with a needle sticking out of the middle one. Rage. It was called Rage. I'd heard about it before. It made you stronger, faster, better at fighting. Just what I needed.

*So... goodbye, you strange bitch I never met. May Celestia watch over you. Heh. Never expected to be a religious smuggler, but the way things are going, even crotchety old stallions need something to believe in.*

The Rage was in my mouth. Part of me kept asking what I'd do if I got addicted to another drug, but there was another voice drowning it out. One that told me I needed to *survive*. And this drug would help me. One of those Mk 2's nearly killed us, and without this we couldn't handle two. So if that was the choice, I didn't have one.

The needle pierced my skin, and I felt heat rush through my body. My heart started pumping faster, and my ears burned as the drug took hold. My whole body twitched. I felt. Strong. And angry. I hated that facility. With all my being I wanted to tear it down with my teeth. I wanted to kill the ponies responsible for it, I wanted their blood. I needed blood.

I stood up. The mattress below my hooves was uncomfortable, and had springs sticking out of it. It pissed me off so I stomped hard. My hoof cut through the mattress as the rest of my body lifted off it. With a swing of my leg the mattress flew across the room into a shelf with a crash. Fucking mattress.

There was a shout of surprise from outside. The voice, my filly's. Those things were hurting my daughter. Oh, they needed to die. My hooves carried me out of the room faster than I thought was possible. I was unstoppable. My whole body felt like it was made of flames: deadly, fast, and full of fury. The thought of tearing those machines to bits just made me giddy.

In the tunnel I saw a blue and black blur zip down the tunnel, and my filly was nowhere to be seen. However, I could see the robots. That's all I needed to see. Those robot bastards and their magical energy weapons. My whole body convulsed as my mind pictured what they'd look like exploding. Their guns started spinning, but the sound of my laughter drowned them out. Oh, yes, let's do this.

They fired, and I ran.

It felt like I was running on wings, and their blasts couldn't touch me as I moved towards them. I didn't go straight for them, instead I was just off to the side of the leftmost, running along the wall of the tunnel so they had to turn to aim for me. They were too slow, and they wasted their ammunition on the wall just behind me. There was nothing they could do, not to me, not by then.

At the last second I pushed off the wall and propelled myself into the air. My path took me above the closest robot's guns. They tried to aim upwards, but they weren't fast enough. The full weight of my massive body crashed into one. And, like whenever I crashed into anything, I won.

My forelegs wrapped around one of the Protectiron's magical miniguns. With my metal leg hooked I pulled as hard as I could. It struggled with me for a moment before my strength overcame it and the massive weapon tore off at the socket in a shower of sparks and wiring. Balanced on my hind legs, I swung the weapon at the machine. Machine and weapon cracked and broke; the weapon snapped in half, the machine caved in muttering about errors.

Its remaining weapon didn't stop firing though, and the other machine was already starting to spray at me. It gave me an idea. Grabbing the machine in my hooves I turned it around so it was between me and the other machine. In a flurry of magical energy, the two machines blasted at each other until both were melted. Unfortunately for me, when the robot I was standing behind stopped, the other was still going, though with only one gun still working.

"Fuck you!" I kicked my robot into the other. "Just die!"

I charged towards the remaining blip on my EFS. Its blasts licked at me, but only one made a direct hit. I was too fast, still too fast. My hooves fell like thunder on its hide, each strike tearing at it more and

more. There were showers of sparks, blasts of green, and me. It was so easy, how could I not laugh. Fuck this facility, I was back.

When they found me I was laughing madly in the midst of the carnage I created. And why not laugh? It was funny. Without the drugs, I was forced to run and hide like a coward as a filly and pegasus fought my battles. With them, I tore robots apart with my bare hooves with nary a scratch. So maybe I was addicted, but who cared? If I could tear apart the robots that had been plaguing us since we entered without so much as breaking a sweat, then the drugs were a good thing. Yeah, I needed them, but when I got them I was unstoppable. That was funny. That was the joke, don't you get it?

Flare carried Serenity back, apparently at the sound of my laughter. When I saw she had taken a bolt to the chest Serenity had to pull me off Flare. He was supposed to protect her. Not let her get shot by weak-ass robots. If he couldn't do his job, then he should just die. Fuck his failure ass. Just... everything was just pissing me off.

“What the fuck, Silver!” Flare said in a shower of spittle when he got his voice back. “What the actual fu-” he stared at me and face hoofed. “No, seriously? What did you put in your system you fucking idio-”

“Fuck off.” I wasn't going to listen to that. Not from him. So I stormed off. He followed, though.

“Was it the Buck? The Rage?” He flew in front of me. “Hired listen to me, this is not a joke. This is a road you don't want to go down, okay? The drugs won't give you what you need. They promise great things, but all they do is take and take and take until you have nothing left. Do you really want to be that pony like me lying in a gutter, begging ponies for your next fix? I've been there, and it hurts.... Are you even listening?” Despite the roaring in my ears telling me to stomp him into putty I was listening. “I know what it's like. Thinking you can't live without them. As if they made you better, but they don't. They make you weak.”

“What do you know? You gave up Dash. At the first opportunity.” I stormed back into the Tram. Serenity followed but was silent. I hoped she didn't understand it.

“Fucking moron, you think that was it? You think I didn't stress over it, get tempted when shit went overboard?” I stopped and stared at him. “Three times I had the chance to use again, but stopped. Just because you don't see it, doesn't mean it didn't happen.”

“What? When?” I started pacing a little bit. My whole body felt the need to move. Keep moving.

“The night right after detox for a start. You were still out, and I was alone. It would have been easy to find some... but I didn't. I can't tell you why, but I held off taking.” He looked. Upset, not mad, but disappointed maybe? “The second time was in the tunnels. You went catatonic, and those things took Serenity. I like her too you know, I hated the thought of harm coming to her. So I ran off after her. Well... you know how that turned out. I got sidetracked by ghouls, and desperate. As if Dash was teasing me, I found one on a desk. If you hadn't of shown up just then I might have...”

For some reason his voice calmed the rage in my belly. “The third time?”

“When we got back to Dise after Karkhoof.” I hated that name. With every fibre of my being I despised it. Just hearing it made the rage boil up again, nearly spilling out. “I knew you were going to talk to me... figure out what I did. To you. You were pissed, and I knew it. So I panicked. I begged Starscream for Dash when you weren't looking and the bastard gave me one. I felt like I needed its strength... in the end I let it go. Maybe I should have, but I needed to face you myself. We both fucked up, and I was determined to face it myself. No matter the result. I needed to face my actions more than I needed Dash.

“Silver, you've fucked up. You've fucked up here, you fucked up in Karkhoof, in Timber, and in Bridle Hope, and Celestia knows where else. And yes, you need to face your fuck ups, just like I need to face mine. But not like this, not with those. You can be a great pony, despite your mistakes, but you need to let go of the things holding you back. With that shit in your system you'll only be a failure, and you'll fail again and again until all you know is the gutter.”

I drew my eyes away from Flare; I couldn't stand to look at him. My eyes fell on Serenity, but I couldn't bear to see her either. With a frustrated sigh I sat on a bench and stared at the ground. The rage that filled me was fading.

My mind traced over Flare's words again and again. Maybe he was right, but I wasn't sure. With the drugs, I was able to come from the bottom to save the day, and without them I was just a useless sack of shit. How could I not use them when the difference was that much? On the other hoof, he spoke from experience. I had time to change, it'd be easier for me than it had any right to be.

Then there was facing my past. Looking back at my mistakes and accepting them. If only it was just Karkhoof, if only it was just Timber and Bridle. How could I look back at Wildfire and Foundation and accept that? How was I supposed to get past the totality of my failure? Just thinking about it brought tears to my eyes, if I could bear to do even that. The Med-X helped with that, it dulled the pain, but it was never enough. Not really.

The tram started moving again. Everything was silent. Just me and my thoughts, and I had a lot to think about.

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We found the factory maybe an hour later, and the Rage had already wore off. I really hoped it wasn't addictive.

The entrance to the factory was a long staircase off the platform the tram stopped at. As we walked silently up the stairs I remembered I left an entire bag of Med-X back in the tunnels. That was... just lovely. And doing a wonder to improve my mood. Really. With my usual heavy sigh I just kept walking.

“You okay, Momma?”

“Yeah...” I sighed. “Just tired.”

“You slept on the tram.”

“Not enough.” The stairs went on for what felt like forever. “Not nearly enough.”

“Oh...” The little filly frowned. “Sorry. We'll be out soon, an' we can get back'ta Dise and rest. I'm sure Haze will wanna see you. She likes you a lot, ya know.” Yeah, I knew that. After everything that had happened, I wasn't so sure she'd want to see me though. Not with my face looking like something out of a horror novel, and my mind fucked up beyond recognition. As Flare would put it: I had a cargo bay full of baggage, and half of it was explosive. It wouldn't have been so bad if the world wasn't always trying to set me on fire....

“I blame Curly Fries,” Flare said from beside me.

For a minute I was thinking about arguing that again, but instead I just shrugged. “Dammit, Curly Fries!” I said way too loud. It was cathartic.

“Dammit, Curly Fries!” Serenity agreed before giggling.

“So.” Flare said as we reached the apex of the stairs where double doors awaited us. “We can agree that whatever horror is waiting us inside is Curly Fries' fault.” We all nodded our approval. He seemed like

the perfect stallion to blame. "Oh, and I made sure to get some medicine from that room." Huh, wait, did he mean... "Ten doses at two a day should be enough to get you back to Dise... unless we get detoured, or, you know, explode."

"I don't like exploding." The Med-X wouldn't be so bad though... I was still... conflicted over what I was going to do, but it was good to know he was trying to help me. At least in his usual Flare-like way.

"Exploding is bad for ya health." Serenity nodded. She would know, of course, because she used to be with The Watchers. "If you explode, I'd blame Curly Fries." With a small chuckle, I patted her on the head. With any luck she'd go on a years-long quest for vengeance. Hopefully, it'd keep her out of places like this.

I kicked open the doors. My strength had returned, well, not completely, as the vomiting had taken a lot out of me, as did the whole getting shot a lot thing. It was more than enough to kick open a few doors though... and apparently it was enough to kick said doors off their hinges. It wasn't my intention, but they crashed to the ground none the less.

"Show off," Flare muttered and walked into the dark factory floor.

According to our map, it was some sort of weapons manufacturing area, for the war, no doubt. I had to step inside to get a good look, as the area was devoid of power. Even with my pipbuck light, it was still so dark that my eye whirred in place and made everything go green and clear again.

It was... huge. The factory floor seemed to stretch into infinity. Conveyor belts on floor level were matched by large, incomprehensible (to me anyway) machines across the ceiling and above the ground. For reasons I'd never understand, numerous catwalks seemed to be strewn above the factory floor. Because that was safe.

Most distressing of all was the number of skeletons. They seemed to line up across the production floor in rows. Some were hanging from the catwalks, or half caught in long defunct machinery. The number was simply boggling. I'm not sure if knowing that they all died asleep made it any easier to bear.

"It's... impressive."

"You can see shit, Hired?" Flare squinted into the darkness. "I can't see much but vague shapes and outlines. Wait, that eye of yours? Are you a superhero now? Seeing in the dark? Maybe Batmare was right to have you as a sidekick, that's a pretty cool power." If the Batmare got caught in a situation like this she'd just teleport back to Dise. Sure, seeing in the dark was cool, but it wasn't really as impressive as all that.

"Yeah."

"Makes sense, with the higher tech forms of cybernetics the systems are designed to unlock over periods of time so as not'ta overwhelm a new user with all these features one by one. By staggering releases it allows the user better control faster." Serenity sure was smart.

"How long until I unlock laser beams?"

"You're not allowed to have a laser beam." Flare said.

"And they don't exist for eyes." Serenity paused. "Yet." So there was still hope. Excellent. Of course the last thing the wasteland needed was me with the ability to fry people by glaring at them... because if I killed everyone I gave a dirty look to, the wasteland would be filled with corpses and pretty mares.

We continued on across the graveyard, finding more bones with every step. It was disheartening that Serenity no longer looked upset at the sight of skeletons: after all we had seen it made sense, but that didn't mean I really had to like it. Taken one at a time, the corpses didn't bother me much, but the sheer

scale of those who had died here threw me off. I was glad that Serenity didn't have my augmented sight. No filly needed to see that.

It was quiet in this part of the facility, and that did nothing for my nerves. It wasn't like the tunnels that had echoed with every hoofstep. Every sound we made here was instantly eaten by the facility, never to be re-heard. Every creak was a sudden sharp sound that disappeared so fast I wasn't sure if I had imagined it or not. Every word quick and sudden. Then there was nothing. I almost missed the humming lights of the laboratory, because the silence was too much. But it was awkward to break; it didn't even want to be broken. As we travelled further in even Flare's jokes became nonexistent. Sacrificed to the silence.

It gave me time with my thoughts, and if you know me you know that me and my thoughts were at constant war. So instead I watched the production line. This part of the facility seemed to be making assault rifles fit for battle saddles or mouth work. They didn't seem to be that well-designed, but they were mass produced so I couldn't really expect much. What was good to know though was that the further we walked down the line, the more complete the rifles got. At the end, there should be a good stock of 'new' rifles... if nothing else we'd pack up as much as we could and sell them.

Which gave me an idea... this facility wasn't deep in the mountain, it was just that the entrance was hidden. If I got enough caps, I could set up an operation to restore the weapons here and I'd have enough guns for my own personal army. Or sell the position or... oh.

"I've know how to stop them." I stopped suddenly as I scanned the factory. Serenity and Flare both looked at me so I continued. "The Steel Rangers. It's simple. Serenity, you have the train map, right?" With a glow of her horn she unrolled the map. "How many exits are there?"

"Er, five, it looks like. Why? We're almost out."

"Where are they located?"

The little filly scrunched up her muzzle before pressing it to the map. "One's here, another is with the Steel Rangers. One's at the 'Medical Research Bay' another at the 'Limb And Organ Fabrication Plant' so cybernetics ah think. The last is at the 'Training Facility.'"

"So? What's the grand plan Hired. The shit in here is dangerous, if you go too far--"

"For us, maybe. We were reckless, and weak. The Steel Rangers are strong. If Simple Heart is growing weaker... then he won't stop them. The robots won't either. Slowly, but surely, they'll strip this place." They'd take everything of worth and use it against the wasteland. "So we make others get to it first."

"How? Wait, what?" Flare seemed confused.

"Tell House where the cybernetics entrance is. For example."

"Oh!" Serenity grinned. "And the Watchers where the medical wing is." I nodded at her, she got the idea.

"Tell the various factions only one entrance. They all get pre-war tech. It cancels out the Steel Rangers monopoly. Gives these factions equal footing." Then I'd tell the remaining factions that the Steel Rangers were there getting valuable tech. Some might try and thin them out... "Not the best option. But the only one."

"Well, who're you going to give the information to? A lot of those folk want your head, just, you know, for your information." Flare chuckled. "Guess you could tell your brother, you know, after you wipe the floor with him." I just shook my head. There was no way the Crimson Hoof was getting involved in this plan. Not ever.

So that was the plan. It was half formed at best, but it was the only real option I could think of. It'd give the other factions the same technology as the Steel Rangers to combat whatever they tried to do

“Do You Really Think I'd Let You Leave With Your Lives? Fools!” The voice made a triumphant return. “Where Exactly Do You Think Needed The Most Security? Here! You Shall Die Tonight!” Was it actually night? I wasn't so sure on that matter. We had been in here so long my sense of time was getting all screwy.

A flash of green came from somewhere in the facility. I looked around but they were too far away for my EFS. “Running sounds like a good idea,” Flare said. I gave a curt nod and helped Serenity onto my back before taking off in a bolt.

My eye was able to give shape to the vague things that plagued us. Some of them in the distance were shaped like regular Protectitrons, other Mk 2's. In both cases, waves of green came flying at us from all directions. Thankfully the crowded factory floor caught most of the blasts before they got close. Just had to keep running.

The dark corridor was alight with green. The blasts flew and reflected off the machinery, creating almost beautiful light shows of death to help us run by. In front of us, I could see we were closing in towards the end of this particular assembly line. Rows of never-been-used guns sat there illuminated in jade. If we could grab those we could fight back, we could survive. And maybe make a few caps on the way.

“Here!” I yelled through a few skeletons to a stop. The sounds of their rattling bones was mixed with the blasts of green. “Guns. Grab as many as you can. Place won't be a total waste.”

A blast of green energy singed Flare's mane.

“Is this really the time to scavenge?!”

“All the more guns to kill High Stakes with.” I answered. That seemed to please Flare as he started shoving rifles into his saddle bags until they didn't fit anymore. I did the same. Serenity tried, but her bags were small, and they didn't fit, she did however float one into her magic so she was wielding both rifle and pistol while propping herself with her forelegs on my head. Flare flapped into the air beside me armed to the teeth, and I took the last rifle off the production line and aimed.

Click.

It was then I remembered you don't build guns fully loaded.

We started running again.

*Just... come back... don't leave me.*

What the fuck?! Why was Wildfire talking to me now; it wasn't the time for that. And Simple Heart said... he said... he might have lied. Shit. More blasts fired past. Serenity returned fire, but her pistol wasn't designed for armour, and the robots were all armour.

“Heeee's back.” Flare said with a bitter laugh. Just then the 'god' of the facility decided to grace us with his voice.

*This one heard the intruding ponies' plans. This one does not approve. This one will not let you escape!*

Apparitions flooded my vision in rapid succession, but I kept running. Post Haste ran past, and I could smell the smoke and burning flesh. Foundation looked up at me, her eyes red with tears and I could taste blood in my mouth. Wildfire lay draped across the floor, blood pooling around her head wound, and her final words rang at me, clear as a bell. Even so, I kept running. The visions came and went, and

I did my best to ignore them.

I'm not sure my companions were fairing as well. Flare was flying erratically, and Serenity kept aiming her gun at things that weren't there. Of course, how did we know the Protectitrons firing at us were there either? Maybe this whole thing was a mirage, a mistake, a dream. Did we ever wake up at all, were we really going to escape? Maybe this had just been an elaborate illusion to trap us in a dream world. Part of me contested that I knew he didn't have the power to create dreams specifically... except I only know that because he told me...

Fuck. I kept running. Dream or not, I was getting out.

I could only hope I was running towards the exit. It was hard to tell, but I had to hope. It was the only way to go though, so I kept running.

*You can't run from this forever...*

Like hell I couldn't!

If I'd had Rage, I'd have been able to run faster though, maybe I would have escaped with just another shot. But that didn't matter, because I didn't have it. All I had were my legs, weak from no food, little sleep and withdrawal. They had to do.

A green bolt blasted into my metal leg, causing sparks to fly. I closed my eyes from it for just a second, but that was enough for memories to start dancing vividly in my head. Not the memories I wanted either. I tore my eyes away as I couldn't before and kept running.

"We can make it!" I yelled. "Keep going. Whatever you're seeing." Foundation laughed gently in my ear. "It's not real. We made it this far. Just a little further. Just..."

I stopped.

My mind blanked. I could hear the bolts of energy wizz past. I could see flashes of green. I could smell burning flesh. None of that mattered. Because I found the exit. I knew what it was. It was the way out. Except for the length of rope dangling in front of it.

And Foundation hanging from the rope.

I couldn't see her like that, but I couldn't look away. I felt my heart shatter again, I felt my soul break at the sight. How could I leave her like that? I had to cut her down. Save her. *Dead*. I couldn't save the dead. The memories ran through my head, as fresh as day it happened. No pony should have to remember the way their daughter's corpse smelled.

Sobs wracked my body. My eyes blurred with tears. Why run? Why escape? What did it matter? I couldn't protect Foundation, I couldn't protect anypony. All I could do was mourn them. Lay down and cry. Beg for forgiveness that would never come. I muttered apologies, but it wasn't enough. It could never be enough. I didn't deserve to escape. This place would be my grave.

*Survive*. A pony in my head whispered.

I ignored it, same as when I had ignored it on the cliff overlooking Marefort. It had been a long fall, or so I was told. I never could remember. Somehow I had survived. Luck, or Celestia's favour. I cursed both of them. Why should a mother outlast her daughter?

I could hear Flare and Serenity yelling at me, but their voices didn't register. I was too lost in the memory. The sadness was too overbearing. Nothing else seemed to matter but my tears... and Foundation swaying in the wind.

*There's no wind inside.*

Huh... against my better judgement I forced myself to look. Foundation was swaying. Inside... because she wasn't there. It was an illusion. I knew that... but what did it matter. She was still dead. My failure. I didn't deserve to live after that. After my daughter.

*You have a new daughter who needs you.*

Who needed me? What was I? A bundle of failures wrapped around too many muscles and a penchant for violence. I had never done a thing right in my life, and only dragged her to horrible places.

*You are not your past. You must face who you were.*

How...

*Survive.*

It wasn't Wildfire's voice I heard. Nor was it some quasi-magical apparition. It was my own voice. The part of me that was still fighting. Still trying to do good. Still trying to live. So I listened to myself and got up. The tears still flowed from my eyes, but it was a start.

I took a step forward. Foundation still hung there. It still tore at my heart. But I had to keep walking. To survive. So I wouldn't repeat my mistakes.

“Momma, are you okay?” Serenity said, her voice thick with panic.

“Yes.” I sounded oddly calm. “I'm sorry. Let's get out of here.”

I opened the door, and there was the bright light of the sun. We left through the door, and didn't look back. We had done it. We had escaped. We were free.

Level Up!

Skill Note: Survival 50

((A/N: I'm sorry for the delay; there were... complications. But here's the chapter, brought to you by me, No One, Kkat who created the story, and my editors: theBSDude, Julep, and Menti. Give these ponies your thanks if you see them. ))

## *Chapter 21: Paying Debts*

*“Sorry, it's just that Shining Armor and I have always been so close. He's my B.B.B.F.F.!”*

We didn't talk about what we had seen. During those final minutes when Simple Heart threw all his power at us in his attempt to subdue us, we had all seen terrible things, things meant to break our will. Things we really did not want to talk about. We never told each other we weren't going to talk about them, but when we had burst through the door into the crisp morning air, we just knew. It was impossible to get the image of Foundation hanging there out of my mind, just like it had been for so long back in Marefort. I was thankful the exit we found was just a carefully disguised door behind a large rocky outcrop, and not on top of something high...

The morning was still new, and there was a thin mist curling around the ground as we walked towards the highway. Nopony spoke for the time. What could we say? Our minds were still processing the amount of bullshit we had just been through, and we were all nursing wounds. I was by far the worst, my coat more black from burn scorches than it was grey, but Flare wasn't far off; the back of his power armour was actually melted into slag on his back, and he winced at the slightest touch. Even Serenity had her scars. Although she'd only been hit directly once in the battle under the tunnels, given her size, it was not a pretty thing. Between the three of us we needed a Vertibuck full of healing potions to get back to full strength.

We found the highway easily enough, as we had been there before. Turning, I looked back at the mountain close behind us. It stuck so high and so sharp into the sky, it looked like a dagger from the earth trying to pierce the heavens. Clouds swirled around its snow-tipped peak, and it made me dizzy to look at. For a second I thought I saw a bird, but it must have been my delirious mind.

I took a deep breath of the sweet morning air, and turned to my weary companions. “You have to choose.” I pointed north. “Go with me to confront my brother. And High Stakes.” I motioned south. “Try to avoid Steel Rangers. Go back to Dise.” Then I sorta waved east and west. “Go the long way around. Easier to avoid Steel Rangers. Much longer.”

“Dise,” Serenity said at once. “Just wanna go home.”

“I say we go find High Stakes and chop his head off.” Flare said that far too happily. “Your brother too. If they control the town, we could try talking to them, convince them we aren't a threat... or something.”

“High Stakes won't be in Bridle Hope.” I was pretty sure. Even chained and sold, I don't think he'd risk staying in one spot while I was alive. Not if he was as smart as he claimed to be. “Smooth Tongue either.” He said he was moving on, and that was true enough. “He said he'd leave a lieutenant. Might be my brother. If it's not, the pony may be tractable.” They looked at me strangely. “I still have a job to do. Make sure trading is not interrupted. I may kill them all yet. But until then I was paid to do a job. I can't go home until it's done.”

A lot had happened since I got the job back in Dise, but I still had to do it. There was no way I was wrenching the town from the Crimson Hoof's... er, hooves, so that means I had to work with them no matter how much it grated at my mind. I was still Hired Gun, I was still a Hizai, and I was Hired for a job, so I had to do it. Hired Gun does not back out of contracts... she may kill her contract holder after the job is done, but that's a completely different story.

“You just said we had a choice.” Flare incorrectly pointed out.

“I said *you* had a choice. You don't have to go with me. I'd rather not risk it...”

“Momma, we're comin' with'ya.” And that was that. Normally I would have tried to convince Serenity it would be safer if Flare flew her back to Dise, but she got that stubborn look on her face, and I had given her the option to choose. Even still, there was no way I was letting her into the town proper.

“Okay. Go with me. Wait outside the town. Don't want to risk you. Again.” I looked at Flare who smirked back. “Either of you.”

“Yay, I'm accepted!” His voice was exaggeratedly happy. “Oh, we should make team uniforms.” What? “Every team needs a pithy name and a uniform. We could be the 'Wasteland Crusaders', but we'll need capes. I wonder how much the Finishers charge to make capes.”

“If you go to them,” I said as I started down the highway, eager to leave the mountain on the horizon, “they'll put you in a dress again.”

“You know, Hired, that gives me an idea. If you're going to go negotiate, you should look good.” Wait, what? “I still have your dress in my bag you know.” I turned my head partially around, giving Flare a nice view of my scars. “Remember in the tunnels? You lost your saddle bag and only managed to save your dress. You gave it to me to hold. I've been keeping real good care of it.” Seriously, is this really where he was going.

“No.”

“Think about it! If they recognize you, they'll shoot on sight, but if you saunter up asking for an audience looking all fancy-like; well, it'll be more likely they won't put you in chains.” He paused as he trotted to catch up. “Not impossible, you're still Hired, and getting caught is your modus operandi.” My... huh?

“Momdius, openrendy?” What the heck was that supposed to mean.

Flare just laughed. He had done that on purpose. “It means like, how you do what you do, get it?” I nodded. “Anyway, wear the dress. You'll lose fewer body parts.” Well, that was always a positive. At the rate I was falling apart I'd be a robot by the next full moon.

“Oh! Momma, you really should.” Serenity trotted up beside me. “It'd cover up your wounds, make you more presentable.” It wouldn't do much for the tangled mess of hair that was my mane, but it would look better than my thousand burn scorches. At least the Med-X made them bearable. “Pleeese.”

“I'll. Ugh, think about.” They tried to talk again, so I flicked on my pipbuck radio. It had been a while, and I was missing out on a lot of news. Somehow I knew I'd be involved.

*“...to circulate about the ghosts of the Goddesses living under the city. If you ask this newscaster, that's a bit too crazy even for a city of robot guards and super heroes.”* I smiled at that. It was good to know. *“And I have more casualty reports from the violence in the north. Seven more survivors from Timber have found their way to Dise, all telling matching tales of the horrors they saw at the hooves of the Steel Rangers. An official spokespony for the group has stated that what they did was a necessary evil to secure the safety of the wasteland, but did not elaborate. They also said nopony travelling near Timber will be harmed. Officially, the NCA has declined requests to bring the group to justice as Timber was not under control at the time. To quote Major Lucky; 'The NCA cannot be held responsible for every evil in the wasteland, and Timber passed up its chance for NCA protection and justice.' Whether you agree with the NCA decision or not, it is true that they lack the pony power to police the entire wasteland. But that does raise the question if they are able to protect Dise like they claim.”*

As I listened, Serenity walked beside me, looking up with pleading eyes. She did like to ride on me, but I was still sore all over and there was no way I was up to being a mount. I glanced over at Flare, and he sighed, picking her up and placing her on his back. Trotting beside me, he gave a rueful smirk and shook his head.

*“Reports from Bridle Hope have been more mixed. We originally reported that the town was being attacked by raiders from the north, but new information suggests that there was an internal dispute inside the town, and one side hired mercenaries from the north. Reports are hard to verify, but I can report that the new town leadership has promised the town will continue as it had before with a few cosmetic changes. We will try to dig a bit deeper. For now, the town seems safe, but keep your chamber loaded just in case.”*

*“Finally, after the zebras of Karkhoof's sudden and devastating attack on the retreating Celestia's Promise that killed nearly all the ponies involved, the NCA promised to march an army to Karkhoof to make them pay for their crimes. When they arrived however our reports state that the town was empty. Apparently, the zebras fled in the night, and nopony seems to know where they have gone.”*

As I focused in on the rather glum news, I felt something heavy land on my head. Something giggling. Strands of yellow and red passed into my vision before I got a view of an upside down Serenity. “Can I ride up here? It's real comfy. Kinda smells though.” With a smirk, I nodded far too much, forcing her to grab onto my ear to stay on. With a giggle, she righted herself and got comfy.

*“In other news, the Chairpony of the New Caledonian Alliance is coming to the NCA base outside Dise in the next few days to sign a peace treaty with the Minotaurs. This unprecedented action is fraught with perils, but he insists it is for the good of the Alliance, and of all nations within.”*

*“Woo! We got time for one more story, so let's end on a happy note. I reported earlier that the Hero of Wending led a group of civilians out of Bridle Hope to escape the crossfire, and that those ponies credit her and her daughter for saving their lives, well guess who came to visit me today in office. None other than the Hero herself! Though she prefers to be called Pinprick, and we didn't have time for a proper interview. She was... not what I expected, and had a mouth that'd shame Nightmare Moon, but she's a good mare, and she's doing the hard work, so if you see her give her a pat on the back. And maybe some ammo.”*

*“Two towns wiped off the map, another in disharmony, one peace conference, and a hero... it seems the wasteland is moody. Well that's enough of my blathering, lets get to the part you actually care about.”*  
A song I've heard a thousand times in the past few weeks played over my radio. The news was grim, and getting grimmer, with a little bit of hope sprinkled on top.

It was nothing I could deal with now though. I had a job that needed to be done, no matter how much it pissed me off. So I kept walking northward. Honestly, after everything we had been through, I was looking forward to the long boring walk. It was better than slowly being driven insane while robots shoot green death at you. So there was that. At least I had Serenity, even if she was determined to be a hat.

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We made it to the outskirts of Bridle Hope by dusk. At least, I was fairly sure it was Bridle Hope, but it was hard to be certain with a wall around the town. It seemed all the unused houses in the outskirts of the the village had been torn down and used to make the barricade around the town. I know Meadow had told me he planned to build a wall around the town, but I hadn't expected him to do it so quickly. It

was hard to not be a little bit impressed.

Serenity had long since fallen asleep on the walk, and was snoring quietly on my head as we stopped and hid behind a large rock. Flare helped me place Serenity on the ground, and took out her brown cloak to use as a blanket. "She is cuter when she's asleep." Flare smirked. When he saw my look he quickly added, "Because she's quieter, I mean. When she's awake it's all 'an I was fixin' her cybernetics when tha inhibitor coil snapped an I had'a-"

"Right." Flare did an uncanny impersonation of Serenity, and it was more than a little creepy. "Point made. Just get the dress." The pegasus looked scarily giddy at that prospect.

"Oh, yes!" He tore his saddle bag off and threw it to the ground with a heavy thunk. Turning his back to me, he dug through it (how much could it even hold?) and chuckled so much to himself I wondered if he just liked embarrassing me, or actually liked the way it looked. It did give me a good look at his back, and it still looked bad. Slagged metal melting on your back had to hurt, and he was being shockingly blase about it. Of course, as he said, he'd had worse before, but still, it made me feel like a wimp for complaining.

"Find it?"

"Found it!" He laughed and turned, holding the slightly wrinkled white and red dress. "It's a shame Serenity will miss it, but there'll be time later." I hoped not. While Flare thought it'd put me in a good position for bargaining (not looking like I'm about to smash heads is always a plus) I was half wishing I'd get into a firefight and ruin the thing. "Alright. Now... how do you put it on again?"

"Uh." I stared at him. "You're the expert."

"Just because I like stallions doesn't mean I like dressing up as a mare. I take offence to that." Wait, I didn't mean that! I just... "Just fucking with you Hired -- the look on your face. I should have told you sooner, because it's funnier this way." I glared. "Though, I really don't know how to put it on." We both stared at the dress...

An hour later I was finally dressed. It was a long awkward thing that we both agreed to never speak of again. Suffice it to say, dresses are annoying and I hate them.

"So... I just walk over to the gate and ask to see the mayor?"

"Sure! Why not?"

"And if they recognize me." The dress pinched at my chest, and rubbed against the worst of my burns. "I die?"

"Why? You're no threat. They're trying to make themselves look like not-raiders, right? Well, killing random passersby wouldn't be very fitting. Besides, they might be expecting you to try and sneak or fight in, so walking through the front door will surprise them. It's genius." Flare seemed proud of himself.

"Or they shoot me in the face." Just saying that made the scars itch.

"You'd just get back up even more pissed." I stared at him for a second before giving a conciliatory nod. How could I argue with that. So far two ponies had shot me in the face, and besides missing a few body parts and my good looks, I was doing well for myself. Just had to keep going, and I'd show the two that shot me how you properly kill somepony.

"Watch Serenity. If I take more than a few hours, leave. If-"

"First sign of trouble, blahblahblah, got it. Just go." He smirked. "It'll be fine. The wasteland is due to cut us a break, don't you think?"

“Now that you said that, I'm going to have to wrestle a hellhound or something.” That was enough to get an amused smirk out of Flare. “Seriously. Be careful. I'll be as quick as I can.” Flare nodded, and I turned to walk away, imagining the thousand ways this could go wrong.

I stepped out onto the roadway and stared down at the town walls. Behind them, a wall of light shone up, and I could see the casino resting on its high hill. It was the same town, but different. From the outside, it felt more secluded, hidden. Licking my lips, I started down the road, ignoring the burning in my wounds. Right. Just go and talk to Crimson Hoof management, no way that is going to be tough.

I took a step forward, and warnings flashed in my head. This was stupid. Suicidal. Going to get me shot again. Still, I kept walking. How bad could it be? I never really tried talking on friendly terms, and running and gunning wasn't going to work this time, and not just because I lacked guns. Maybe I could do talking. How hard could it be. So long as it wasn't Smooth Tongue...

The gate loomed, and I could see two ponies standing guard outside it. Behind each of them was a crudely painted flag of a bloodred hoof print. Subtle. Still, I kept going forward, even as they pointed their guns at me. Right. Be cool. I've done this before.

“State your business.” The blood red mare to my left said. Wait, mare? That seemed wrong, but I couldn't put my hoof on why.

“The mayor. I need to speak to her.” I did my best to brush my mane in front of my scarred face. “I am a representative of Mr. House.” The two looked at each other, confused. “A gang leader, and partial ruler of Dise. Do not keep a Hizai waiting.”

“Uh.” the mare turned to her stallion partner and nodded at him. At that he swiftly went into the city, probably to ask what a 'Mr. House' or 'a Hizai' was. “What's your name?” The blood red mare squinted at me. “Do I know you?”

“Hired Gun. And I doubt it.” I smirked at her, trying my best to look confident in my dress. “I've come a long way to be here.” Not a lie. “You shouldn't hold me up.”

“It's my job. No pony without business in Bridle Hope will be let inside by orders of Mayor Summer Silk.” Ah, so it was Meadow in charge. I tried not to let my apprehension show on my face. It was a good thing the night was dark. “Are you sure I don't know you?”

“Ever been to Dise?” The mare shook her head. “Then no.”

“Who did you say you worked for again?” The mare was very careful to keep her mouth close to her battle saddle bit.

“Mr. House. Runs 'The Black Salamander Casino'. Has a cybernetic empire. His enforcers are called The Hizai. Cybernetic warriors.” I motioned to my leg, but that seemed to make her more suspicious. “Here to organize a trade deal. Were you taught nothing?”

The mare's suspicious look turned into a rather heavy glare. She didn't say anything else so I matched her glare and brushed my mane out of the sway of my scars so I'd look more menacing. The stallion took his time so we just stood there staring at each other as the wind whipped at my mane and dress.

Eventually she asked, “Why is your eye glowing?”

“Last one got shot. Got a better one.” I missed my eyepatch. I'm not even sure where I had lost it, but I missed it. Part of me had hoped I'd find another lying around. “It has many functions. It also shoots laser beams.”

The red mare laughed. “Now I know you're lying.” I shook my head. “Show me.”

“No.” I quickly added. “It'd kill you.”

“Don't aim at me. Are you an idiot?” Well, ask a stupid question.

“Well.” I looked at a rock not too far away and glared at it. “Stand back.” The mare did so, looking a bit conflicted. On the one hoof it was clear she didn't want to believe me, but on the other I could see how curious she was. So I glared hard at the rock. My eyes started to whirr to life and I could feel its glowing intensified. The sound of my eye intensified until I was sure it was going to overheat and...

Nothing happened.

My eye could still not shoot lasers. The look on her face was really amusing though, so I kept it up for a few seconds longer. Just in time for the stallion to return.

“Jas,” He panted, running through the gate. “Summer wants her brought to him at once, and requests you escort.”

“Huh,” The pony named 'Jas' said. “But...” she turned to me and glared.

“Well.” I looked away from the rock and attempted to saunter past her without tripping. “Another time then. It is such a cool trick, too.” His glare only intensified as I trotted through the gate and she was forced to follow. I was beginning to understand why Flare always teased me, it was pretty funny.

The town looked very similar, if much smaller now that it had a wall to constrict it. I noticed some of the more decrepit buildings (including the old school with the bell tower) had been torn down, making the town feel cleaner. Also, wooden posts with lamps now lined the streets making it far easier to see. It was annoying. The changes actually improved the town, at least on a superficial level. But it had only been, what, five days at most since I was shot? There was no way he should have been able to work so fast.

“Protection is paramount,” Jas said bitterly when she noticed me staring. “Summer had us use all our resources to construct the wall. It's still weak, but with time... the lanterns were so we could work through the night and be able to see. The remaining civilian population liked it, so we've decided to keep it.”

“I see.” I noticed she was leading me towards the casino, that was not much of a surprise. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why protect the town?”

“It is under Crimson Hoof control, and when we take control of the town, we keep it under our control. To do that, we break a town's resistance, and then offer them a better alternative to rebelling. In time they accept us.” She smirked as we started up the hill.

“Where are you from?”

“Stallionguard.” She laughed. “A bloody stupid name for a small town. Called after some bigshot city in the north, we took it because it fit. I doubt you'll ever go deep enough into Crimson Hoof territory to find it.” Stallionguard. For some reason I imagined that's what Marefort would have been called if the mare's were dragged off, and the stallions stayed... I was going to have to ask about that, because it piqued my curiosity.

“Right.” I almost asked about Marefort, but I thought better of it. This mare clearly had no idea who I was, and I didn't want to say anything that could tip her off. “So you like them?”

“Who, the Crimson Hoof?” I nodded. “Well, fuck.” We reached the door to the casino. “I guess. They're my family, and my job. It's not a matter of like or love or shit, they're my family.” She shrugged. “Now shut up, I don't know what Summer wants with you, but it can't be good.” She eyed my dress. “Nice, a bit small.” She was telling me! Fuck, it stung. Chafing against my burns.

The casino was almost exactly the same, save for a few blood stains that had not been properly cleaned up, and it was completely empty. The blood red mare (who I just realized had a grey mane peaking out from under her helmet) led me around a few Rainboom Riches machines to a small, dingy back hallway that led to a room labeled, "GM's Office."

The room was small, with a large window overlooking the town dominating one wall and a chart on the other. I didn't pay attention to it, as my brother was sitting across the room from me at a desk. Upon entering, he pushed the paper he was looking at away and stood up. "Sister." I opened my mouth, but he kept talking. "I've been going over casualty reports. How many did you kill in the battle?" Accident. I was a bit startled; he didn't even look at me. "I... three. Or, four. Something lik-

"Primrose." Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jas tense up at the name. "Was found dead outside the casino with her stealth buck still activated." Oh, yeah, I remembered that pony. "Head caved in. Such a shame. What did she do to you?"

"I-what? She attacked me. In a battle. I was fully justified in everything I-" Something slammed into my chest. Grunting I stepped back, and turned. My EFS flashed red, and my eye placed a brown box (meaning she was a low-level threat) around her. When she turned and aimed her battle saddle at me, though, it quickly changed to red. "Shit." She was too short, I couldn't duck.

So I did what I always did. Charge.

My head hit her neck hard, making her gasp for air. A second later I wrapped my foreleg around her neck, and slammed her to the ground. The mare struggled with me, but even injured she didn't stand a chance of overpowering me. I looked up wild-eyed to my brother as I tried to figure out why he did that.

"Jasmine." He leaned over the desk. "Silver will let you up, and you will go peacefully." The mare glared but nodded.

Though I didn't really want to let her go, I did. When I did she immediately wrenched away, spat at my hooves and walked out the door. When it slammed shut I turned my head to my brother. "You killed her wife." I blinked. "Primrose, the invisible mare you assaulted. Or did you think the ponies you killed had no lives? You don't even know how many you've killed."

"She would have killed me." I stomped my hoof.

"Yes. So you killed her first." He smiled. "We're both killers, but you try to lie to yourself about what you are." What, what the hell was he talking about? "And I-

"Oh shut up." I straightened out my dress. "One of these days I'm going to kill you. Not today though. I'm not that stupid. I'm here on behalf of Mr. House. I had hoped it wouldn't be you but..." he shrugged. "I'm not here to argue morality. Accuse you of being a raider. Or shoot you. I'm here about trade." My EFS showed three green ticks, but only one pony. My shoulder burned, so I had to assume stealthbucks.

"Oh..." a blush came to his cheeks. "I thought you'd be... uh. So..." he chuckled awkwardly. "So... about trade..."

"You make a shitty Smooth Tongue." It was clear what he was trying to do. He thought I was going to come in here raging about this or that, and he was going to throw that death in my face. While I felt bad about the fight, so his plan worked, his attempted manipulation wasn't really conducive to the conversation. "He would have waited. Until he knew why I was here."

"Thanks for the advice." He grimaced. "So... Silver."

"Meadow."

The silence was deafening.

Why couldn't I have been anypony else? It was bad enough swallowing my pride and finishing this job for House, but with my brother here, it made it all the worse. Old wounds resurfaced and made my blood boil and what was left of my ears burn. After everything he had done, how could I just dumbly accept this. I should have killed him. Nothing less than what he deserved... so why did I hold back?

"I can't believe it's you," Meadow said. "When you were a child you were so... happy. Full of energy. Large, yes, and a bit slow, but this is..." he shook his head and sighed. "Why did you attack stable 42?"

"For you!" I said at once, almost believing it. "I saw you. Attacking the caravan, I was going to-"

"Bullshit, Silver." He glared at me. "That's bullshit. You had over ten years to care about me, and where were you then? Do you think I don't know what happened? You fall from a cliff, tell everypony you lost your memory, and then come and try to save me?" I winced. That was not one of my better lies. But after everything that had happened, I just wanted to... forget. Pretend like it didn't. Go into my little world and forget my failure, because remembering hurt too much. "Were you trying to get killed?"

"No!"

"Because if you were." he continued as if he didn't hear me, "I can get you help. Dise has some good therapists I hear, it'd cost-" I slammed my hoof down and he shut up.

"I went to save you. I thought. Fuck, you're working for raiders."

"Didn't you just say you came here to not have this argument?"

"Well, we're having it now!" He just smirked when I said that. "I mean, that's why I went to save you. Because of... them. And..." and maybe I was looking to redeem myself. Make up the loss of one family and get another one back. Or maybe he was right and I was trying to die a hero. "Yeah, I fucked up."

"How many did you kill?" One, Wildfire. The others didn't matter. When he saw I wasn't answering, he kept talking. "Seven. I informed each of their families. And you can't even tell me why!"

"They were raiders!"

"So what does that make you?"

I... that... I was a.

Fuck.

Tears stung my eyes. I just wanted to be a hero. Like The Lightbringer. But instead of making mistakes and doing better to the point of clearing the skies, I just made mistakes, got ponies killed, and then did it again and again. I lost my brother and mother, so I made up for it with Wildfire and Foundation... then they died, and I found Serenity and Flare. How long until I fucked up and...

I felt something soft on my face. My brother... was nuzzling me.

That was so not happening.

I wrapped my leg around his neck and threw him to the ground. After everything, I refused to take comfort from him. To my surprise he actually rolled back to his hooves and lunged at me. Did he really think he could out wrestle me? I know I promised not to kill him, but damn, he was just making this way too easy.

Except. When all was said and done, he had me pinned on my back with a cocky grin on his face. Even after all these years, instincts kicked in, and I let him win. Just like when we were foals.

For some reason this made me astoundingly uncomfortable, and I wrenched away and rolled to back

onto all fours. "It really is you." He looked bewildered. "I had thought maybe... I don't know. Thought maybe you weren't really Silver, it had been so long after all... that maybe..." he paused. "I'm not sure if that makes it better. That you'd do all of this." He laughed bitterly.

"You mean like." I did my best to hide the emotion in my voice. This was my brother, still. I thought he'd changed, but maybe it was just me. "Attacking a town. And stealing control."

"If it wasn't us, it would have been something worse. We let anypony who wished to surrender stay unmolested, and many did. We are giving them safety, security, and the backing of an up-and-coming empire. If the Steel Rangers came through would they be offered such courtesy?" The charred remains of Timber flashed through my mind. "Or raiders? Or when the slavers got bored of using this town as a hub and decided they'd get more money just taking them all? Or if the minotaurs crossed the east western and thought this would be a great place to send the NCA a message?"

"What if the NCA came. Protected the town. They'd do a better job than yo-" He cut me off.

"They're more professional and have more ponies, but they have enemies. So far the only enemy we have is *you*. If the NCA took the town, it's the closest to their most dangerous enemy, and furthest away from their power base. They would retreat." Oh, that was a good point. "The town would be defenceless. The town can't survive these troubled times on their own, it needed direction. What would you have us do?"

"Give them a choice."

He laughed. "Yeah... we could have done that. But ponies are stupid. They need guidance,"

"Not like this."

"Well we're at an impasse then, aren't we." He slowly trotted back to his desk. "There. We had our little sibling spat. We're never going to agree with each other. If there was any way I could reach you, I'd do it, but you've always been stubborn." He sighed. "Silver... you're my sister, it kills me to see you make this mistake. The Crimson Hoof is not a raider gang. We're ruthless, but for a purpose."

"And Smooth To-" he slammed a hoof on the desk to cut me off.

"He's not your enemy! When you attacked the stable and killed ponies he offered you a job, a *job*. When you came back again he tried to convince you to stay, and when you were dying from your wounds he ordered you fixed up. He told me if I saw you again to give you another chance. Hell, how do you think you got that pipbuck?" Huh... Wildfire bought it for me. From a trader. You know, I never did wonder where a trader got a functioning pipbuck. "Smooth Tongue gave them to ponies who weren't selected to join under the regular procedures, but he felt were worth it."

"Wildfire gave it to me..."

"She knew full well what it meant. Smooth wanted you to join him, and you keep spurning him for no reason."

"He killed our mom!" How could he keep forgetting that?

"Silver, she was..." he sighed. "We've been over this. Are we never going to have a civil conversation?" I glared. "That's a pretty dress. A bit tight, but it suits you." I... my glare softened a little.

"Thanks." I paused. "I guess. Whatever. Lets just get this over with. Mr. House requires something of you. He needs-"

"The town to be free of taxes on traders, I know. High Stakes and I have already worked out a deal that should be satisfactory." He did, what, why?

“Wait, what?”

“He insisted on finishing his job before joining us. He made a good argument, and we agreed. Which reminds me.” He pulled something out of a drawer with his mouth, set it on the desk, and nosed it towards me. Slowly, I edged forward and took the object.

“An audio recording.” I took the recorder in my mouth and slipped it into one of my collar pockets.

“Why?”

“High Stakes. He wanted me to give it to that pegasus of yours if you came back.” He laughed. “Buck was getting all emotional about it, too. You should have seen it.”

“The only way I'll see him is dead.” My brother winced at that. “Where is he?”

“You know I can't tell you that.” He shook his head. “He did try to kill you after all, and I know how badly you take that. Shoot you once an-”

“You shot me with poison from space!”

“One time!”

We matched glares. Mine won because he looked away first.

“I just... can't do this with you Silver. You want me dead; I want you gone. We can't go five seconds without yelling, so I think you should just... go. It was a mistake to think you changed.”

“Meadow...”

“Oh, get off it. We hate each other. I'll have a guard escort you to an empty house, your friends, too.” He looked past me out the window. “Yes, I know about them. You were reported hours before you got here... the weapons we took off you will be returned.” For some reason, getting Subtlety back felt hollow.

My emotions were a twisted wreck. On the one hoof, this stallion had betrayed me, but on the other he was still my brother. Even more, he actually wanted to help me in his own little messed up way. Part of me hated him, hated the sight of him. And the other part wanted to rush over to hug him and apologize for whatever it was I did. Tears welled in my eyes again and I tried to force them away by remembering the time he shot me. That just made more tears come. It just hurt, and I didn't know why. He wasn't the same colt he was... but.

“Fine.” The two stallions who were stealthed beside Meadow declodked.

“Escort Silver away. Make sure I never see her again.” His voice was cold and passionless. I followed the two ponies to the door, and heard Meadow speak one last time. “Silver... if you don't leave tomorrow. I'll kill you myself. I'm sorry... goodbye. Get better.”

“Seeya, Meadow.” I was taken away from my brother, and I doubted I would ever see him again. Instead of sad, angry, or anything, I just felt... dull.

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After getting my weapons (Subtlety!), the guards escorted me out of the casino and into the night. Right outside the door, I saw Jasmine glaring at me as I passed. No doubt she was going to try and kill me, and then I'd be forced to kill her back. That thought did not fill me with joy. It was easy to kill ponies when you don't know them, but killing a pony you'd widowed was many times more difficult, even if in self defence. Not that I usually fought in self defence...

The mare didn't touch me, on account of my guards, but I could see she wanted to. As I was escorted down the hill, I did my best to think about something else, anything else. It was surprisingly difficult.

I was led to a one-story house that was built so close to the wall it looked like it was more support than home. It looked mostly intact though, if you didn't count the windows which had been blown out centuries ago. One of the guards shoved me roughly inside with the command. "Don't start trouble. We've been ordered to kill if you do. Your friends will be brought to you shortly. In the morning, we'll bring you to the edge of town. You are not allowed back. Ever." Yeah, I got all that before. Idiots.

The door clicked behind me. Inside, the house was mostly empty, save for a table in the kitchen, a single bed in the bedroom across the hall, and a chair in the living room. A few candles had been set up and pre-lit. That was awfully nice of them, because I had just been going to use my pipbuck light. Lacking anything else to do, I sat down at the kitchen table and hefted Subtlety onto the table.

The orange light reflected off the smooth black surface, gleaming on all the scratches and scuffs. My brother had been doing a shit job keeping it for me, and it desperately needed to be cleaned and maintained. Well, I had the time, so I took out a rag and some cleaning supplies and got to work. Unicorns liked to brag about how their magic made things easier to manipulate, but earth ponies and pegasi had practice, and for me it was simple to start taking Subtlety apart. My mind faded from my task as my hooves did their work. I'd taken apart so many guns in so many ways (In Marefort, when we found weapons we had to make sure they worked before we could sell them) it was like second nature.

My mind went back to the facility. So much happened in so short a time in there that it stayed with me even though I'd been out for nearly a full day at that point. There was just so much in there, and I never found the answers to my questions. Like what actually happened to Baptisia. Whether or not anything Simple Heart told me about his powers was true. How they managed to attach a megaspell to a pony. What the hell was up with the voice over the radio. Why all robots suck. Unless I ventured further into the deep of that facility I would never really know.

And that was not going to happen. While all those questions (the robot one in particular) were important, I wasn't about to risk going back there just to figure them out. The most nagging question was the voice (not the robots, that's just the most annoying). I was confident that the voice and the megaspell-pony were not the same, but beyond that.... Flare gave a few good options of who it could be, but that really raised more questions than answers.

With a frustrated growl, I set aside the detached barrel after cleaning it. Subtlety really was a piece of work. For what it was, it was surprisingly simple in design compared to some over-engineered high-powered rifles I'd seen. It had fewer parts to be worn down or get gunked up, making it the most reliable anti-material rifle I'd ever handled. Made it fairly simple to clean too, but I took my time. It helped me relax.

Well, it usually helped me relax. In the dim candlelight that day, it just seemed to make me more nervous. Taking it apart reminded me of Dise. Or at least the structure of how it was run. The vital internal parts were like the gangs; if you wanted the city to function you needed them all. The scope was like the NCA or the Watchers. It wasn't necessary to fire the weapon, but it made it many times more useful. Just like Subtlety, sometimes the pieces inside needed maintenance, like killing Roy needed to happen to put the Mustangs back on track. And sometimes pieces needed to be replaced completely, like way back when the Baises took over another gang for control. Eventually though, if the weapon breaks more and more, you were going to just need to get a new gun.

I set the last cleaned piece off to the side. Some of the components were getting used, but for now they'd still work well enough. Once I got back to Dise though they'd need to be replaced or Subtlety would break on me at the worst possible moment.

"Alright." I grabbed the receiver of the gun. "Time to put it back together,"

"You know Silver, you shouldn't talk to yourself," Flare said from the entrance chamber. "Somepony

might mistake you for unbalanced.” I couldn't be bothered to crack a smile at the joke.

“Flare!” I heard Serenity say. “That's not even funny.”

“In the kitchen.” I finished snapping Subtlety together and set it on the table. My brother had given me my ammo back too and I looked at my two options. When I had come down to Bridle Hope what seemed like forever ago I had planned to use my fire ammo to take out raiders, and I hadn't used that since Post Haste. Once again though the thought of using the bullets left a bitter taste in my mouth. Sliding that magazine away, I loaded Subtlety with a magazine of regular bullets.

“You won't believe what we found while waiting for you.” Flare trotted into the kitchen. I turned around to see Serenity riding on his head, and something riding on hers.

“It's Scootaborg!” That it was, though she looked much dirtier than last I saw the toy. “I must'a lost her when she attacked that guard, when we got nabbed behind that rock back when we first came here, 'member?” That I did. “So when I woke up outside, guess who I saw staring at me!” She lifted the toy dramatically in her magic. “It was awesome! She needs replacement parts though, hers are all dirty.” She frowned, but I could tell she enjoyed the prospect. There were few things Serenity liked more than fixing Scootaborg.

“Oh.” Flare trotted over to the table. “The stupidly named gun has been returned, too.” He was one to talk. “Please tell me-” I cut him off by pointing to the corner where I'd dumped the rest of the weapons we got back. “Bunker Buster!” He flew over to the corner and excitedly cradled the weapon in his forelegs. “I missed you so much.” He started to pet it. Talk about over the top.

“Are you just about done?”

“Wait...” He petted it twice more. “Waaait.” and a third time. “Okay done now.”

Serenity jumped onto the table to get a better view for which to smirk at Flare from. He was being especially silly. “So, Momma.” I turned to her and gave her my most convincing smile. What I wouldn't do for a healing potion. “Are we captured again?”

“Actually no.” Both Flare and Serenity stared at me in stunned silence. I did not find it that amusing. “We could go now. But he gave us a place to rest tonight. We have to leave tomorrow, though,” and somehow make it around Steel Ranger territory. There was no way they were going to be pleased with my escape. “If we don't, then he'll kill us.”

“That's a marginal improvement!” He laughed. “So instead of being forced to stay, we're being forced to leave. Just peachy.”

“Better than robots.” Serenity frowned. “Robots are like... super-cybernetics, so they shouldn't suck as much as they did.” She rubbed her burn wound. “Hate them. So much. An' better than creepy voices and singing an...” her voice trailed off. “When're we getting back to Dise?”

“Soon,” I said at once. “I hope.”

“Can we stay there for'a while, 'cause I like it there 'an...”

“Yeah.” I pulled Serenity into a quick hug. “We can stay there for a bit. It'll be safer than... whatever it is we've been doing.” Hopefully House would put me on jobs inside the city, or nearby. If I went too far, Serenity would demand to come, and I didn't want her to. If nothing else, maybe I'd get a break for detox... assuming I did that. I was still torn on the issue.

“An' we can see Haze again right?” With a blush I hoped was unnoticeable in the candlelight, I nodded. I would very much like to see her again. For many reasons. Which, for some reason, reminded me of the audio-log my brother had given me for Flare.

“Yeah, we can see Haze.”

“Ya gunna kiss her?” Warmth rose to my cheeks.

“Uh...”

“That means yes.” I mumbled something incoherent and blushed more. There was no way that was going to be hidden by the dim light. Judging by the combined laughter, I guess they noticed. Or my reaction was hint enough.

“Uh... so. Flare.” I cleared my throat. “I have something for you.” That cut his laughter off and garnered me an inquisitive look. “Wait...” I nosed through my pack until I found the disc and slid it over to Flare. “Here. Meadow claims it is from High Stakes.”

“So the ass has something to say,” Flare said. His voice sounded cocky, and he smirked, but I could see nervousness in the way he stared at the disk without looking away. “Mind if I use your pipbuck, Hired?”

“Sure.” I hefted up my pipbuck to him. Very quickly he attached the device and stared at it saying nothing. “You don't have to...” I did my best to be comforting, but it was new territory for me.

“Hah, it's. Nothing.” He pressed play and my pipbuck clicked. “Nothing at all.” High Stake's voice wafted over my pipbuck and through the room. It pissed me off.

*“Is this thing on? Yes. Yes. If you are listening to this I hope you are Flare, and nopony else. If anypony else is listening to this, it does not concern you and I advise you to turn it off.”* Flare looked at me and shrugged. Neither me nor Serenity went anywhere.

*“When you did not come back, I guessed what had happened. You went to save the idiot, did you not? For all you insult her, I cannot understand why you have been so loyal to her, but... I should still have guessed that would be your choice in the end. I had wanted to believe... I wished you would see your mistake, and come with me. I could have offered you a reprieve from your life, a way out. You could have left the Enclave; they never respected you. They have treated you like shit since before Bitter Steel, you have said as much yourself. You have given them your everything and they threw it in your face! You deserve so much better than that. You could have gotten away from Hired too, for all you like her you cannot deny the danger she presents. Every day another stupid reckless action, another haunted tunnel, or hopeless battle. I could have...”*

*“We could have gone with Smooth Tongue. Nopony would bother us. The jobs would be easy, the pay good. We would have been together without having to hide from your superiors, we could have had everything you said you wanted. A free life, a safe one. Instead you went after her... Why? Why would you run after that... she doesn't care about you, not like I do... I thought you'd realize, understand and...”* His voice choked and it sounded like he was breathing heavily.

*“Fuck. I mean... okay. I just do not understand, I thought you cared, that you -- l... it does not matter. I was wrong. Just another fling in the wasteland... right? I do not know. Maybe if I had killed her properly you'd be with me and I wouldn't have to... to...”*

*“Flare. If you are listening to this... wherever you are. Just know I did what I did because I thought it was the best for you, for us. I thought we could be happy, a foolish thought in this world but when I saw you smile I believed it was possible. And what is one life compared to that? I am... sorry I failed to understand you. I am sorry you failed to understand me, and that we didn't get enough time together.”*

*“I feel like an idiot. We barely knew each other, a little over a week, maybe more, but in the Wasteland”*

*you take what you can find, and I found you. Then lost you...*

*“Now I have lost my point. I am sorry, Flare. If you are listening, please know I am so sorry I hurt you. I never thought... I understand if you never want to see me again, but if you do... the deal still stands. If you want me again, then I will be waiting. Until then, I guess this is...”* the voice choked again and the sound became something muffled and unintelligible before it turned off.

We stared at the tape for a long time and no pony spoke.

Eventually Flare, tears welling in his eyes, stood up. He quietly turned around and left the kitchen, and a few seconds later I heard the bedroom door shut, and the lock click. I pretended I didn't hear anything else after.

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“Is Flare gunna be okay?” We had moved to the couch in the living room after putting out the candles. Since Flare had claimed the bedroom for his pity party, we were resigned to sleeping on the couch. It was problematic, given the couch could barely hold me. So Serenity was forced to sleep on my back.

“Yes... I think.” She squirmed on my back. “He just needs time to think it through...”

“Is he gunna...?”

“I just said he'd be okay.”

She prodded me in the back of the head, so I half-turned to look at her. “I mean, go with High Stakes.”

Huh, oh. I guess he was given the offer again. If he wanted to, I'd let Flare go. Not that it'd be my choice, but I didn't think it'd be good for Flare. High Stakes was a dick, and Flare could do better than him. On the other hoof I was biased on account of the fact that he shot me for caps. Of course, I'd shot a lot of ponies for caps too, but it was different when you're on the receiving end of the bullet. I suppose if I was a smarter pony I would learn something from that.

“Oh... I don't know,” I said eventually. “You should get some rest.”

“You should, too.” Yeah, I should, but that was not a likely outcome. To say I was troubled would be an understatement. Between the final vision Simple Heart forced on me, having to deal with my brother, Flare's mental state, and all my usual problems and issues, my brain was swimming to much for sleep to seem plausible.

“I know.”

“What's wrong, Momma?”

“I'm tired.”

“Then sleep!”

I laughed. “Not... that sort of tired, well kind of... it doesn't matter, I'll try to sleep.” And the next day we would travel south to Dise and try to avoid being caught by the Steel Rangers. Somehow. Hopefully I could just kill any that got too close with Subtlety, but the chances of it being that easy were... yeah. I rested my head on the couch and sighed.

“Goodnight, Momma.”

“Goodnight.”

I didn't sleep there. For a long while, I just rested there and listened to Serenity snore on my back. How long had it been since I last slept? It must have been at the tram. It felt like forever ago, but I couldn't

find it in me to sleep. I was as tired as I had ever been but I just couldn't...

The house was dark, save for the light from my pipbuck. Slowly, I brought over the device and looked down at it. Carefully I flipped on the ear bud before turning to the radio function. Mr. New Haygas wouldn't be broadcasting live, so it'd be either all music or repeats of what I already heard. I tapped it a few times when I noticed I had a second station saved... I didn't remember doing that. So I flipped it to that, and listened.

“...*Wishing star, alpha protocol to hybrid rockstar, welcome next stop.*” Wait, what? I stared at the screen as it spoke more insanity into my ear before I remembered something. Way back when I first got my new eye (I still needed a new eyepatch), House had told me about how he contacted his agents. A radio station filled with codewords, but the catch was each agent had their own set of codewords, so they couldn't give away anypony else's. Which means... he may have been trying to contact me.

So I listened to that for a while as I flipped through the database of codewords also on my pipbuck. My codename was supposed to be Star-Mare, so I just had to wait for that to come up and hope I could keep track to see what he wanted to say. It seemed a bit complicated, but if it kept secrets.

“...*Star-Mare.*” Oh, that was me. I was on the radio, that was pretty cool. “*Blackbird et alamo. Luminosity.*” I tried my hardest to remember what those words were, even though it sounded mostly insane. Flicking through the log I was able to determine that 'Blackbird' meant 'Return to base' and 'et alamo' meant 'or request assistance'. As for the second word...

What was it again. Luna... light, lumi... something. Crap. I skimmed the list of keywords, but I couldn't recall what the word was, and it didn't help it was one of those big words I didn't know anyway. Growling I moved the pipbuck away from my face.

At least I knew he wanted to see me, probably asking why I was so late. The job was done at least, even if it took longer because we got sidetracked through pre-war hell.

As I stared into the darkness I thought I heard something. Straining my ears, I could pick up the sound of shouting, and... that was a gunshot. Lovely. I guessed it was just a fight, and it didn't concern me, so I kept my head down and tried to sleep. Eventually the yelling died down, and I felt my eyelids grow heavy. Sleep, I hoped. At last.

Knock, knock, knock.

The world hated me, I decided.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Fine. Carefully I set Serenity down on the couch and trotted over to the door. After tripping over no more than three things I found myself there to hear somepony knocking again. Annoying. When I opened the door I was treated to my brother standing there.

“You need to get out,” He barked at me. I just glared back.

“You said we could stay for a-”

“Shut up.” He barged in. “Get your things. Wake up your friends. You need to leave.” I stepped back for him, but didn't stop glaring. When I went to open my mouth he cut me off again, “They've come for you. Steel Rangers.” Oh shit. “I don't know how, but they know you're here, and they aren't happy about it.” With everything that had happened I'd forgotten an important fact; so long as the facility's password was on my pipbuck, they would be able to track it down.

“Why do you even care?”

He looked at me for a second and didn't respond.

“How many?” I guess it was better not to ask that last question.

“Enough. Five by my count, but that's enough to blow a hole in this town it'd take months to fix.” Only five? Hell, I'd managed to take out five on my own. Of course I took them by surprise, and it very nearly killed me. Still, I had Flare on my side, and Bunker Buster...

“Is there another way out of town?”

“A few secret exits, that's why you need to be quick.” Meadow trotted his way around looking for something. My companions to wake up, maybe. “We can't pacify them forever, and some ponies want me to give you away.” Lovely. “So hurry the fuck up.”

Yeah, yeah. I quickly trotted over to the bedroom and knocked hard on the door. “Flare. Flare. Get up. We need to leave now. You can finish moping later.” On the other side I heard a grunt that sounded like an agreement, so I walked away. Hopefully he could get his shit together soon enough to escape, I was hardly one to talk, but we didn't have the time.

By the time I got over to where Serenity was, she had already dressed in her brown cloak with all her stuff packed into her saddle bags. She smiled at me. “Heard ya' talkin', so I got ready.” With a smile, I nodded and turned back to the main hallway.

“Oh,” Meadow said looking at Serenity. “This is your new daughter right?”

“New?” Serenity tilted her head in confusion. At that moment I really wished I could shoot laser beams from my eyes.

“What?” He looked at me. “You didn't tel-”

“Do you have any healing potions?” I cut him off before he could continue unveiling my past before I was ready. He gave me a curious look that I pointedly ignored, before he dug into his bag and hoofed over four healing potions. After drinking one (It felt so freaking good to finally heal some of my burns.) I let Serenity have one. She wasn't as badly hurt as Flare or I, but she was smaller and not used to pain like us.

“Thanks, Momma.” Serenity smiled at me. “Feels much better. Battle scars are cool, but they hurt!” With a smirk, I nodded at the filly. “So from now on I'mma hide behind you; you're better at getting shot.”

“I don't think,” my brother said, “that getting shot takes skill.”

“Nah, but getting up after does, and Momma is the best at that. This one time-”

“This isn't the time for stories.” Not that I wanted to share any with him, anyway. I really didn't know what I was supposed to think of my brother anymore. He was an antagonistic asshole who worked for raiders, but claimed he was doing the right thing and sometimes you had to kill ponies to save more. Which was not so far off from my thought process working for Mr. House, and it didn't help that I came here in the first place planning on slaughtering a raider gang. But then, he came here explicitly to save me (unless he had a nefarious purpose I couldn't see). It really did a number on my 'kill the fucker' plan.

Flare had gotten emotional over High Stakes' message, which meant he probably had some feelings for the bastard, so I couldn't kill him yet either! My murder list was getting annoyingly short. I blamed Curly Fries. At least he was still on my list. Right alongside Blackwater (I could imagine her cackling evilly at the thought).

“Flare, we need to-”

He burst from the door in a flurry of feathers with a smirk on his face that looked painted on. “I'm

ready, I'm ready." He fiddled with his grenade launchers and when I tried to hoof him a healing potion he pushed it back. "The armour is still sort of partially melted into my back, hurts like a bitch, by the way, but if I try to heal it then it'll heal around the metal and make it harder to remove. I'll need surgery when we get back to Dise, and I expect you to pay, you crazy, crazy mare." I tried to interrupt, but he kept talking. "Hey look, it's the Nightmare Moon to your Celestia, rape any foals lately?" Calm, Silver. Calm. Flare was just overcompensating, and I shouldn't go beat his face in for being an idiot.

I took a deep breath, placed a hoof on the back of his head and pulled him close so we could talk in near-private. "Are you okay?"

"Peachy, chief." He smiled. "Didn't know you liked being this close, are we going to..." his voice faded at the force of my glare. "Don't worry about it. I'm not abandoning you, not yet anyway." That was... mostly reassuring. I guess.

"Do you want to... uh, talk about it?" That was my attempt at being friendly. It wasn't really in my skill set.

"No! Yes, maybe?" He pulled back, "Maybe once we're back in Dise and things have settled down; we have shit to do."

I nodded an affirmative and looked over to my brother for his plan... there is no part of that sentence I liked. "We need to get you three outside town. There's another gate, but it's kept hidden. Go east through the hills before turning south if you plan on going back to Dise. Once you've been gone long enough, I'll let them look through the town. You owe me one, Silver."

"You shot me! With poison! From space!"

"That's right. I guess we're even."

"And it won't work. We'll need to kill them." He stared at me blankly. "They can track me. Sort of. If I leave they'll know... and know you hid me."

"...Okay." That was easy. "Kill them, bury the bodies. They were never here. But how?" He must have seen my look of confusion. "They're assholes. Half of my ponies want to kill them, the other half you. This way I can prove my strength against a superior force, in terms of armament anyway."

"Right." That made sense, right? "The idea is. Lead us out the gate. We flank around. I hit them with Subtlety." I motioned to the large gun on my back.

"You named your gun?" My brother raised an eyebrow.

"A stupid name too, if you ask me she shouldn't be allowed to name any-"

"This isn't the time!" I cut Flare off. They both shut up and let me talk, though Serenity looked like she was about to laugh. That filly was forever giggling. "I hit them with Subtlety, and Flare hits them with Bunker Buster, which is a much stupider name," I quickly added, "while they're distracted. Have your ponies shoot them. You have strong guns right? Armour piercing bullets?"

"We can manage." He didn't sound so sure. "Anything else?"

"I'll need 25mm grenades," Flare said confidently, "as many as you can spare. And if I can add an addendum to the plan, I get my weapons and set up in the sky on the other side from S'n'S." I guess he meant me and Serenity... "Subtlety is not exactly subtle, so I'll wait for the signal and blow them apart. That way if one of us gets caught the other can jump in to help." I guess that made sense.

"What do I do?" Serenity asked, jumping up in the air to be noticed. "I can fight too."

The three of us looked down at her silently.

“So...” Flare said slowly, not looking away from the filly. “That's the plan.”

“Yup.” I agreed, ignoring Serenity.

“Yes.” My idiot brother agreed.

---

After quickly leaving the house, Flare was escorted away by one of Meadow's ponies, hopefully to get weaponry. Serenity and I, however, were led to a small door in the wall which blended in so seamlessly that I didn't notice it until we were already there. It must have had something to do with the fact the wall was junk hastily made into a wall shape, with wooden beams holding it up. After a few minutes of fighting with the door, Meadow let me through.

“Silver,” he said when I was halfway through, forcing me to turn awkwardly in the narrow doorway. “Whatever else you are... you're still my sister. I hate you, you hate me, but we are blood.” His eyes narrowed. “I'd like to think... think that still means something.” Like it meant to our mother? Is what I wanted to stay, but I kept quiet. “So don't die out there... and just... get better.” Because I was fucking sick, yeah I knew. I couldn't really argue with the mentally damaged part (my denial only goes so far), but hearing him talk about me like that twisted my gut.

Still, I was having a really difficult time hating him. Since Stable 42, we had talked so little, and all our conversations vitriolic, that I'd imagined him in my head as a Blackwater-esq villain. You know, lighting ponies on fire to hear them scream, kicking puppies, that sort of thing, but he wasn't. He was harsh, but he actually thought he was helping. When I looked around at the wall it was hard not to believe he was helping.

“I'll try not to... You too. I'll. Leave you alone. When this is done. Thanks.” I looked away from him and kept walking into the night. I didn't look back at the wall until I heard the door shut behind us.

“I thought you were gunna kill Uncle... what's his name?”

“Meadow. No... not yet anyway.”

“He's confusin'.” There was nothing else to add, so I nodded silently and started walking. Luna was out in full force that night, letting me see even without my night vision turned on. Instead of following the wall, I went out a bit before circling around. The ground was as rough and rocky as it had ever been.

Obviously, my pipbuck light was turned off as I walked, and I tried to crouch as low as possible, even when I couldn't directly see the Steel Rangers. Serenity copied my technique but didn't cast her silence spell because of the light. She was a smart filly. Eventually we passed into the line of sight of the Steel Rangers.

Five of them stood in a rough line, bathing in the torchlight of the front gate. It gave me a good view of them, now I just needed a spot to fire. Serenity tapped my leg and pointed out a large gathering of rocks similar to the ones we hid behind those two times, with an easy way on top. I could fire from there and hide behind it if they counterattacked. It was... well, an obvious plan, but whatever worked.

I just had to hope that Meadow kept his side of the bargain.

By the time I reached the rock the clouds moved in and partially covered up the moon. It didn't take long to get set up on the rock, but it did take a bit longer keeping Serenity hiding behind it. She wanted to watch the fight, but that never worked out well. After I finally placated her (I let her take out her gun and watch my back), I looked at the group of Steel Rangers.

I really liked their armour. It was large, and shiny, and hard to break, not to mention making you faceless so ponies wouldn't be able to see how ugly I was. Too bad all the ponies I had seen wearing it

so far were a good deal smaller, so I doubted I'd find any that'd fit me. It was a nice thought though, and I almost felt bad for having to destroy a few.

Sitting there waiting to take my shot reminded me of back when I'd first found Serenity. It had been raining then (it rained a lot less since the clouds had cleared), and there was thunder, but I felt the same sort of tension. There was a cool sweat on my forehead as I pressed my eye against the scope. There were five ponies this time, not just one, but it still was important I killed on the first shot. I took a deep breath and marked my target.

Of the five, three of them had large miniguns attached to their power armour, another had a couple of grenade launchers, and the final (and I presumed leader) had a rocket launcher on one side, and a grenade machine gun (Flare would be jealous) on the other. If there was a firefist I was going to need to take him out first so he didn't accidentally destroy the entire town. Who needed that many explosives? Really. He must have been overcompensating for something.

I wasn't really sure how far away I was from the pony, but I had to guess two hundred and meters away, maybe a little bit less, and the wind was blowing slightly north. After adjusting my aim to compensate I watched the pony. She just stood there, turning her head from time to time. She didn't seem to move, which was good for me. So long as she stood still, Subtlety could give her an apple sized hole and we'd be able to start the assault.

I inhaled and held it there. My aim was perfect, just had to bite the bridle and she'd die, and I'd *survive*. For some reason I hesitated. My mind went back to that invisible pony I killed, and her wife. Maybe this Steel Ranger was married, maybe they had kids, a family. Who was I to decide they needed to die? Why was it in my right? Just because I had a big gun and got the jump on them. My jaw clenched, and I couldn't bring myself to kill her.

Above me, the clouds parted slightly, letting Luna's moon shine over the dark wasteland: a light that just happened to hit my scope.

The pony whose head I was stalking turned to me so fast I flinched. Subtlety roared. The bullet zipped past the pony into the dirt.

"Shit!" I screamed, loading up another shot, but they were already moving towards me too fast, I didn't have time.

"Sniper!" somepony shouted, followed by a whoosh of a rocket.

The missile hit the rock just as I tried to jump away. The blast wave hit me and sent me flying. Pain throbbed through me as I hit the ground. My ears were ringing, and dust and bits of rock were raining over me. I tried swearing to alleviate the pain, but I couldn't hear my own words. When I opened my eyes, my vision was fuzzy. Still, I scanned for serenity. She had to be okay she...

...was huddled behind the half destroyed rock with a pink glow around her. When she saw me looking she started waving, so I waved back. For some reason that just made her wave harder. Oh, she wasn't waving. She was pointing. Why? My brain hurt.

A steel face appeared over the rock glaring at me with glowing eyes. Oh, that's what she was pointing at. Fuck.

The Steel Ranger aimed her weapon.

And a flash went off behind her. The world shook, and the steel ranger turned. It had to be Flare, that cheeky bastard, I owed him.

Quickly, I rolled to my hooves. I charged. Before the Steel Ranger could react, I was on her. My body slammed into her steel carapace. It was strong; I was stronger. She fell on her side, and I was on her in

an instant. My metal hoof met her metal face with a great clangour. Neither budged so I kicked again. I could feel her helmet start to give so I kicked down again and again, and again, eventually raising my whole body and bringing both hooves down with all my weight.

By the time I was done, the helmet was a flattened bloody husk.

My vision was so focused I didn't notice the rest of the battle going on around me. One of the other Steel Rangers were lying on the ground, probably dead, while the remaining three were retreating away from the flaming wall. Wait, shit, why was the wall on fire? Some ponies seemed to be putting it out while other fired against the steel soldier, their weapons doing pitiful damage. Somewhere over head I thought I saw a blur, and a second later the Steel ranger ranks were scattered by fire and smoke.

I scoped Subtlety and looked down at the smoke. The battle was moving too fast though, and I started charging towards it to make my shot easier. Unfortunately that also made their shots easier, as a Steel Ranger scrambled to her hooves in the smoke and just happened to see me. I could barely pick up the sight of her minigun starting to warm up before I started to move. The bullets slammed into the dirt in front of me as I started to run sideways away from them.

It didn't seem to matter how fast I ran as the bullets caught up nipping at my tail. If only I had Rage, I would have been able to outrun them.

Pain flared through my right hind leg as bullets ripped into it. I fell hard and rolled through the dirt as bullets whizzed closer to me. This was going to suck. Only it didn't. Because I wasn't shot. Which was surprising, as this was usually around the time I got shot and lost a body part. Since my ears were still not working properly I had to look up from my ball of fail at the fight.

In the dim light I could see a silver-grey stallion rapidly shoot a shotgun into my attacker's head. The metal helmet sparked and snapped back. Then the pony's head righted itself and the stallion was kicked back. The iron clad pony swung around, minigun still spinning.

For reason I didn't understand I scrambled to my hooves (my hindleg roaring in protest) and I took aim. Subtlety fired and found its mark. The steel ranger stumbled, a new hole her armour, when I fired again. The third shot put her down for good.

Meadow looked over to me, his face unreadable in the moonlight.

Another blast filled my vision (I could actually hear this one as my ears slowly recovered), so I turned away from him to the battle. One of the remaining steel rangers was a twisted sack of metal still smoking from the explosion, while the last was being pushed back with concentrated gunfire.

I helped the final Steel Ranger on her way to Tartarus, then sat back on my flank. Fuck, my leg hurt. And bled. I hate bullets. If it wasn't for adrenaline, my leg would have hurt a lot more, so yay science I guess.

Doing what I imagine Serenity would do I tore out a healing potion and poured it over my leg. The wounds stitched themselves closed, and I felt a small measure of relief wash over me. Not as much as I'd get with Med-X, though. Luckily I was fairly sure it was getting close to the time I could get the dosage off Flare. I was looking forward to it. One thing at a time. The fight was over, and I needed to see to a few things. Namely my idiot brother, my daughter, and... Flare.

Slowly I returned to my hooves and looked around. The Steel Rangers were already being systematically stripped of their armour and weapons. I doubted they'd be able to use the armour, given its super high tech nature, but I suppose it wouldn't hurt for them to try. Unless it exploded. If that happened there would be one less Crimson Hoof to deal with! There was no way I could lose.

Yeah...

Before I could go and confront my brother I felt something slam into my back leg. “Momma! Are you okay?” Sure enough, the little pink filly was latched onto my leg with a hug. “I tride'a shoot at them, but mah gun didn' work right, it kept not workin'.” She frowned. “I need more gun.”

“No.” She pouted. So I shook her off my back leg making her land on her rump. “It's for emergencies, not for Steel Ranger hunting.” This did not please her at all. “I'll take away your dessert...”

“As if we ever have any!”

“I'll buy some, then take it away.”

“... Fine.”

With that victory, I helped my daughter (maybe if I kept calling her that it'd stop making me nervous) and trotted over to Meadow. He was in a middle of a group of ponies, waving his hoof this way and that way to direct ponies. Patiently, I waited outside the little circle until the ponies dispersed and my brother stood there. His face was a mask of blood from a small wound above his eye that he must have used a healing potion on. When he saw me he frowned.

“Silver. You should go.” He walked over quickly, lowering his head. “I lost seven ponies here, most new recruits, so you're lucky. We would have lost more without your plan, but if we had given you up...” I nodded my head in understanding. Seven more names to add to the list of my failures. “I'm trying to play it as a victory against overwhelming odds and a hostile aggressor. If anything it'll show the civilians we mean to protect them, so I can play it right, just...”

“It's fine. If you see me again I'm dead.” He nodded. “I'd like to kill you too.” With the blood stains over his face I couldn't tell if he was grimacing or smiling. “Actually... I have something for you.”

“What is it?”

“Give me one second.” I quickly turned away from him and moved a good distance before looking at Serenity. “You have the map of the facility?”

“Yeah, it's...” She magicked out the map. “Here, momma.” It took a few minutes but I was able to figure out where one of the entrances to the facility would be by using my pipbuck map (which marked the factory's entrance) and comparing it to the facility map. It would have to work; my defence against the Steel Rangers depended on it. I marked the approximate location on my pipbuck and turned back to my brother.

“Here.” I shoved out my pipbuck. He just stared at it. Then back to me. Then at it again. “Ugh, Go to that location.”

“Why... what are you try-”

“Bring explosives to breach the door. Inside is an advanced pre-war facility. That's the entrance to a training facility. It will have equipment. Programs. Lots of it. Enough to help you. Fight the Steel Rangers if they find out what happened. Give you power. Tell your ponies you got it from a corpse. More propaganda.” He seemed to like that idea. Giving this technology to The Crimson Hoof was probably a bad idea, but my brother just went far out of his way to save me. Moreover, both were powerful groups around Dise, but not based in Dise, so the chance of conflict was high. I needed the sides as evenly matched as possible.

“Is this a joke?”

“Not at all, Uncle!” Serenity had found her way to my head. “It'll help ya! For real!”

My response was to shrug and say, “Go there or not. Up to you. I'll leave now; don't die.”

I left him there. I've had enough of emotional goodbyes. My emotions were as mixed about him as ever, and I just couldn't deal with it. I just had to find Flare, and that'd be the end of it.

Flare wasn't that hard to find as he landed in front of me with a cocky smile. "So." He flicked back his sweaty mane. "Did you see how many I got?" He blew on each barrel of Bunker Buster despite the fact they obviously weren't smoking. "That's how the Enclave does it." He gave a triumphant victory pose.

"You're a credit to team. I need you to do something for me."

"Anything for you, Hired, because, you know, I haven't saved your ass nearly enough." There was a smirk on his lips I wanted to smack off, but I suspected he knew that.

"Fly to Dise as fast as you can." He nodded slowly. "Tell House I need help. Get him to send... somepony to help escort us. The Steel Rangers will be out for blood. Can yo-"

"No problem," he cut me off. "We all need to get back, I'll run the message. I'll need to borrow some of your medicine." My ear twitched. "Just two. My back is..." yeah, okay, that was a good enough reason. "You can keep the rest, do not use them all right away or you'll be fucked, I'll be back as fast as I can." He quickly dug into his bag and tossed me most of the medicine in a bag, "There's something special in there too." He winked and flapped his wings. "I'll be quick; don't die."

Just like that he flew off. I still needed to talk to him about High Stakes...

After taking out a Med-X and giving myself a dose of sweet relief I gave the rest of the bag to Serenity. "Put that away for me."

"Huh." Ever curious, Serenity started to shuffle through the bag. It was not like it was possible to hide it anymore. "What's this?" I turned to the south and started walking down the road. Behind me I heard the sounds of ponies working and small fires burning. Carnage I had created. "In case of emergency." Serenity said for reasons I couldn't explain. So I kept walking south. I was running on no sleep, and no time, with enemies determined to hunt me down. So I had to keep walking.

Something fell over my eye, and half my vision was gone. My cybernetic eye flashed warning and attempted night vision before turning off.

"In case of eye-patch emergency," Serenity repeated. "Flare thinks of everything."

The lack of vision made things clearer. I was tired and sore, but I'd places to go, ponies to talk to, a city to save, and redemption to be found. Just had to keep walking.

Level Up!

New Perk: Adaptive Eye Programming II: Your practice with your new eye has paid off, increasing the range of its EFS, and improving its threat-detection in low-light environments. In addition, you've noticed your eye now has a night-vision function that turns on automatically after you've been in the dark for a second or two!

((A/N: 100K views. That's a terrible way to start a sentence and yet there it is. It's been nearly a year, 300K words, and 100K views. I wouldn't be here without all my wonderful readers [yes you!] so you have my utmost thanks for sticking through this sorry excuse for a [excellent] story. You're awesome, and I love you.

I as always need to thank Kkat as well for giving me a blank canvas to write upon, and my lovely editors theBSDude, Mint Julep, and Menti. Here's to another 100K! ))

## *Chapter 22: Are We There Yet?*

*"These people, they're like ghosts, always hiding in the shadows, always hiding behind lies and proxies."*

Dawn broke over the horizon, bathing the land and sky in a beautiful wash of oranges, yellows, and reds. It also stung my bloodshot eyes and reminded me that it had been a long time since I got any sleep. Even Med-X could not stop my eyes from burning. Serenity, however got a lot of sleep last night and the day before, so she was ready for the day. And loud.

"So I thought you were a goner f'sure, what with tha blast an' everything!" She gleefully retold the events of the night before. "But I had'a believe you'd be okay, so I whipped out my pistol and BANG!" My ears twitched and I did my best not to wince. "Cept it bounced right off his mask! Can ya believe it?! My magic zebra pistol! Well I was determined ta defend ya, so know what I did?"

"What, sweetie?"

"Kept shootin!" I never would have guessed. Her story didn't make walking much easier, as she had to stop every few seconds to pose dramatically, or act out a scene. "See, I had this brilliant plan. Whenever my bullet hit her visor, it sparked, so I kept sparkin' at the visor, givin' ya plenty a time to--"

"I was there, if you remember."

"Ya were hardly payin' attention to the finer details 'cause ya were busy stompin' ponies flat." Well, it was one of the few things I was good at. "So you're lucky I was there ta help ya. I'm an awesome distraction. Oh, I had an idea. What if I got a--"

"Whatever you are about to ask, no."

"What bu--"

"You're not allowed to get cybernetics."

"I wasn't even gunna ask..." Her voice trailed off, and she pouted. "How'd ya know I was gunna ask?"

"Because you always ask." I smiled weakly. "Then I say no. You pout. Then we do the same thing again the next day." She blinked at me.

"Same time tomorrow then?" she said with absolute sincerity. I nodded, and she gave me a smile before hopping onto my back. "Cept it's early an' I'm gonna want to be sleepin' now, so maybe we can postpone it." Yeah, I thought that was a great idea. Morning, as a rule, sucked. Especially mornings where you have been fighting and walking all night.

In the distance I could see the mountain, getting closer and closer. Even though we were far away, it still looked like a huge blot on the horizon, and it made me shiver to look at. As if the memories of that horrid place weren't bad enough, it reminded me of the memories I had to relive in there. Things that... I closed my eyes and thought of something else. Anything else.

I forcibly shifted my thoughts to the task at hand. Between us and Dise were dozens of Steel Rangers who could at least passively track me down. They were armed to the teeth with high-tech ballistic and explosive weaponry, and were currently being commanded by a mare who made Nightmare Moon look like a paragon of mercy. As usual, my choices were dim, my hope little, and the chance of success high. The best chance I had was to take the long way and try to circle around the mountain, but that would

take an extra couple days, and I was uncertain that I'd enough Med-X to last me that long. My Pipbuck map only marked towns I'd been too, and there was nothing nearby (the closest was Snake Head but that was days east). Of course that was not even counting our food and water supply which was also not doing the best.

It'd be easy enough to find a small stream, but it'd be irradiated and I didn't have any Radaway. Still, that would be better than nothing. If I ran out of food, I could go hunting, it wasn't like the wasteland lacked wildlife (mostly mutated, but still). However, I was not sure Serenity would eat meat if offered. So that was not a very good option.

Our best hope was that Mr. House was tractable when Flare went to ask for help. That is if Flare hadn't decided to ditch us for High Stakes, but I tried not to even think of that option. He really should know better than that, but love makes you do strange things. If it was indeed love, it's hard to tell.

I sat down on the road (causing Serenity to slide off) and rubbed my eyes. So tired. If I could have gotten away with it, I would have slept there forever. Or at least for a day. Nightmares be damned.

“You okay, Momma?”

“Tired.”

“Don't think we should jus' sit here though.” She looked around warily. “Too open. Don't look like much nearby.” Rocky brown hills to the east and west, Bridle Hope behind us, and the mountain in front. Wait. I looked to the east again. There was an amber blip in my augmented vision. It faded, then came back. The blip did this a few more times, travelling north to south before disappearing.

“Hey. Hey, Momma!” Serenity waved her hooves. “Are you lookin' at your HUD? Innit cool? Can I get one? What do you see?”

“Yes, yes, no, something.” I got back to my hooves and walked towards where the blip had vanished. It was worth a try at least, and with Subtlety on my back I could destroy it if it was a hostile. Not that I figured it would be hostile, because my magical vision told me it wasn't. That sounds logical right? When has technology ever failed me...

Despite the obvious flaws in that argument, I kept walking. It was easy enough to walk up the shallow incline of the closest hill, and on its crest I could see that it was steeper down the other side. Between the hills, I could see a figure a good distance away walking south. My EFS read her as a friendly, but with my eyepatch on I couldn't read any additional information about her.

“HEY PONY!” Serenity yelled from beside me. “HEY! HEY!” The pony stopped and turned to us. She looked familiar. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING? HEY! WHERE YOU GOING? WE NEED HELP!”

The pony waved and started walking towards us. Oh, wait.

“Pearly?” I said when she was close enough to hear.

The white mare smiled sweetly at me. “Now there is a sight for sore eyes.” To my surprise, and embarrassment, she nuzzled my cheek. “Saw ya back in town, and I thought, wouldn't it be nice if ah lent ya a helping hoof.” She smiled down at Serenity who seemed displeased about something.

“Town? Bridle Hope?” She nodded at my question. “Why were you there?”

“Well it weren't like I could escape. When them raiders took the Casino, they gave a lot of us the chance to surrender, ya see. Now we lost and I didn't like dyin' so...” Yeah, I understood. “They made us help build the wall, and then gave us the option to leave. But, for many ponies.... It's their home, you know? Lived there forever and didn't want to leave, so most stayed. Some what got evacuated even came back. Not me though, I was plannin' on leaving once I got my stuff together.”

“And then we came back?”

“Yup! Heard bout it right after that fight from some mutterin' guards. So I took to hoof to find you. Figured you'd take the south road.” What else could I take? “If you're heading to Dise, you should join a trade caravan. Strength in numbers, and smart ponies won't attack them what are protected by the NCA.”

Oh, well that did make a lot of sense then, travel south and pray. Now that I thought about it, too, wasn't there an NCA base nearby? I remembered hearing something about that sometime. It was... I could not recall. Somewhere.

“Where is it?” Serenity asked the smart question, though she was still giving Pearly a weird look.

“This way, ah'll lead the way.” At that, she trotted off north-eastish, over a hill. Serenity motioned for me to wait and hopped on my back when she was a good distance away.

“Who's she?” It was right about then I realized I was an idiot. For some reason I just expected Serenity to know her, but each time I had met Pearly, Serenity was unavailable. So of course she would be suspicious of some random mare I found on the road and started nuzzling. This was the sort of thing I should have thought of before making a fool of myself.

“She's a friend, from Bridle Hope.”

“She sounds familiar.” There was a haunted look in her eyes.

“Serenity...?”

“I...” her voice trailed off and she seemed to be staring into something in the distance. “Okay, right. Friends. Let's go.” I tried to ask if she was alright but she cut me off. “I'm fine! Really! Just... c'mon...” Reluctantly, I looked away from her to see Pearly waiting a good distance away looking at us oddly.

“Okay...” I said to Serenity before following after Pearly.

---

We found the NCA Camp around noon. By then, I was completely exhausted, to the point that I fell asleep multiple times while trying to walk. Which is not nearly as difficult as it should have been. Pearly gave me a Sparkle Cola, and that was supposed to help. It almost sort of worked, as I didn't fall asleep, but I certainly did not feel less exhausted. I might have felt worse actually.

The camp itself seemed to be a small outpost on top of a rather large hill that was so steep on one side it might as well have been a cliff. We had to take a long way around the hill to reach the stairs that led to the series of tents that formed the camp. I noticed that at the foot of the hill there was a small building and a few carts of goods. Made more sense than dragging them up the hill, I supposed.

The top of the hill had the camp surrounded by ditches, dikes, and what looked like spiky walls pointing outward. I also may have been mistaken, but it seemed like the wooden staircase had a series of plastic tubes attached to it with a strange liquid inside. If I had to guess, I'd imagine something flammable. Clearly this place was very well defended. Which was pretty self-evident given what I just described. I'm an idiot sometimes.

Two guards stopped us at the main gate. I didn't get a good look at them, as I was busy wobbling from side to side trying not to fall asleep. I did notice they talked with Pearly for a few minutes and there was an exchange of caps. I would need to pay her back for that. Near the end, my weary mind picked up the words. “Place to sleep...” from Pearly.

The guard pointed into the camp mumbling something I couldn't be assed to listen to. When Pearly motioned for me to follow I did.

“Darling, we need to get you to bed. When was the last time you slept?”

“Uh.” I tripped over a rock. I thought I heard a pony snicker near me. “It was... I was supposed to. At the town... but...” I blinked. “Before that. In a mountain... for a few... before that...” I only really slept for maybe an hour or two on the trolley, and I was pretty sure the psychic dreams didn't actually count as restful.

“Long time.” I nearly jumped when Serenity spoke. She was still lounging on my back, but she had been very quiet, so I'd almost forgot about her. “When we headin' out?”

“Tomorrow, just before noon; they're waiting for a general from an outpost in the east.” Why, exactly? “You should rest until then, you look beat up.”

“The face right? Scars. I'm ugly now. I mean. Always been ugly. Much uglier.” It was hard to talk when tired. My tongue kept moving before my brain could catch up.

“Ain't that bad.” She was lying. If that wasn't clear. “They make you look badass.” I was badass before. That's all I was, and now I was ugly and badass. The worst kind. “Considering you got shotgunned in the face, you're a picture of health.” I wish she didn't remind me of that. It sucked.

“Yeah. Lucky me.” It was just my luck my best friend's buckfriend betrayed me. And I was also lucky enough to be put through psychological hell inside an ancient pre-war facility where everything that moved wanted to zap me to death. I was the luckiest motherfucking pony ever.

“Well, maybe not lucky but... hon, don't look so glum. You have your health, and your-”

“GUN!”

Yes, I did still have Subtlety. Wait. I lifted my head up and looked around. Who said that last part?

“HIRED GUN!” The gravelly voice yelled again. I kept turning around, looking for the voice, until I was face to face with—

Zombie! I almost screamed that out loud in my exhaustion. Instead I caught my voice, looked the ghoul in his milky white eyes, and said, “Major Lucky?”

The ghoul gave a gross grin and nodded. “It has been a while Hired. Too long. I see you're doing...” he looked at my face, my eyepatch, and half missing ear. “Well, you're alive.” He paused. “We need to talk.”

“What are you even doing here! You were in Dise. Before. Right?”

He just turned away. “Please escort Miss Gun to my tent.” Two guards flanked me. So much for sleeping. “And only Miss Gun... well, and her foal. You can try to take the filly away from her if you wish, but I doubt you'd survive.” Damn right. Even half asleep and sore from a thousand wounds I'd kill anypony who tried to hurt her. Or touch her. Or anything.

“Wait, hon.” Pearly said, but a shoulder shoved her roughly away. “Hey now, that ain't how ya treat a pony. I'll meet you outside his tent Hired! Don't fall asleep.”

Yeah, that was going to happen. The lovely and talkative guards led me silently through the outpost to a rather sturdy looking tent underneath a small watch tower. Inside was a small desk, a foldout bed, and other assorted stuff... I'll be honest I was only really looking at the bed. It looked so comfy.

Focus. Just. Focus. I sat across from the desk with the guards still flanking me. I hated them.

A few minutes later, the ghoul officer strolled through the entrance and took a seat across the desk from me. This seemed to happen a lot right before I was lectured at. I can't imagine why. “Hired.” He shuffled through some pieces of paper not looking me in the eye. “I have received a report...” his voice

trailed off and he got the piece of paper he was looking for. "That you are currently a Hizai."

"Uh. Yes." I scratched idly at the scars on my face.

"An elite cybernetic warrior, assassin, and spy charged with advancing Mr. House's interests in Dise, Caledonia, and beyond?" I nodded. "One of the elite..." he shuffled the papers. "Well the numbers are changing, but there are anywhere from thirty to sixty, and you are one." I nodded. "Really?" I nodded harder. "Don't li--"

"Yes! I'm a fucking Hizai!"

"Just making sure." He set the papers down. "You can understand my... suspicion. You are not exactly known for your tact." His face contorted to what must have been a smile. "Why, exactly, did Mr. House hire you?"

"It's classified."

"Right. I need a favour to ask o--"

"Two hundred caps." I leaned over the desk with a grin.

"Oh, I was going to offer you three hundred." Oh come on! "Just kidding. I'll pay you one hundred and fifty."

"Two hundred and twenty five." I put my metal hoof on the desk. It was actually more to keep me from falling over and going to sleep than to intimidate.

"You know, ponies don't usually don't go up from the starting price." He seemed only mildly amused.

"Normally. But you need me. You made it clear you need a Hizai. We tend to be difficult to find." I gave a smile. "So how about two-fifty."

"Two hundred." He slid an envelope over. "I need you to deliver this to Mr. House. Not to his assistant, or his friend, or on his desk, to him directly. Don't open it; it is for his eyes only. Yes I am sure you will anyway, but you won't understand it so there is no point." Now I felt like a spy. That was pretty cool.

"Okay..." I slipped the envelope into one of my collar pockets. "If I can ask, why are you here?"

The ghoul tapped his rotten hoof on the table and gave a sickly smile. "I don't believe that was part of the trade." Ugh. I was too tired for this shit. "But I'll tell you. I'm here because of you." Well, wasn't I important. "You did the NCA a great service." He continued not to make sense as he rose and started to walk around his desk. "Did you know that since Timber burned and Bridle Hope was taken over three new towns have joined with the NCA? That was in a matter of days. Days. In a few weeks who knows how much larger we will have grown." What? I didn't understand.

"Why Timber? You didn't control Timber. You were kicked ou--" Wait. Something hit me.

"Yes, you forced me out. After you helped me kill the last of the fighting ponies. Do you remember?" I nodded dumbly as he continued towards me. "It was all over the news, and wouldn't you know it, a few weeks later it burns. Which wouldn't have happened if we were there. It got ponies thinking."

"Really." I looked away from him. "You expect me to believe that. You planned this? Really? That's a bit contul... convulated."

"Convulated." I hated when ponies corrected me. "And yes, it would be. It was one of many contingencies I worked out, and it just happened to be the option that stuck. Why have one plan when you can have a dozen going all at the same time?" I guess that made sense. If you were a smart pony. I could barely hold down one plan at a time (and my current one was a doozy) so I could only nod.

“Congratulations. I totally care. So you're here to... supervise the change in management?” Serenity snickered on my back, but then went back to being completely silent.

“Supervise the new supply lines needed for our new territories. Such as this camp. A well defended outpost for trading caravans. The route completely ignores Timber, and Bridle Hope too.” He must have noticed me start to doze off because he shouted. “Attention! Listen up. You are suppose to be an agent of Mr. House, now don't you think he might find this information crucial.” I blinked at him.

“What?”

“You are useless.” He just shook his head. “Go, I need you no longer. Make sure to deliver that letter.” Right, I think I was missing something important about the nature of our conversation. Not that it mattered if it was that far above my head, so I just turned around to the tent's exit. “We're leaving tomorrow just before noon. Be ready.” He called out at me.

I turned my head back around. This conversation was annoying. I just wanted to sleep. “We?”

“To Dise. The NCA Chairpony is giving a speech, and I'm going.”

“Right.” I walked out through the tent flap, imagining all the ways that this could go horribly wrong. On the top of my list was a random Balefire Explosion.

Thankfully, right outside, I saw Pearly waiting. “Pearly.” I walked up to her. “Don't take this the wrong way. But take me to bed.”

---

Soldiers in green stood in a line overlooking their enemy's encampment. They had been making steady progress, and it was nearing time to put the war to an end. For each pony that stood ready to bring the battle to an end, five more had fallen in the line of duty; good ponies who only wanted to return home when the battle had run its course. For their sake the green soldiers were prepared to put everything on line in the final assault. A battle which would change the course of pony history.

There was a whistle. Panicked ponies looked upwards, but they were too slow. The cap slammed into their line sending ponies flying.

“No fair...” Foundation was, like any filly, really good at whining. She looked from her line of toy ponies to where I sat on the bed. She had managed to take over much of our little house, winning her bed, much of the floor, and the table, and forcing me back to a small semi-circle around my bed. It was a delicate game of war that I always seemed to lose. “It was my turn,” she continued. “You can't attack on my turn.”

“Sweetie, you're the one who said bottle caps could be used at any time.” Wildfire stood by the door and was forced to play referee in our little game. It was possible that I always lost because Foundation was allowed to make up new (and entirely inconsistent rules) on the fly, while I got to deal with it. Not that I was complaining, I was perfectly content to let her win.

“I meant I get to. Momma can't.” The red mare raised an eyebrow at her daughter. “Cause she gets to set up a new soldier every turn, an' I can only every other turn. It's only fair.” While they argued I just smiled and leaned back on the bed.

“Oh... I see.” Wildfire looked at me and I gave her a curt nod. She could have this little victory. It was going to be lunch soon anyway, so we had to quicken our pace. “Okay, next time. But this one still counts.” The filly gave a little pout and reluctantly nodded.

“Take this momma!” She bent down and grabbed a bullet casing in her mouth and tossed it at my army. It slammed right through the centre of my soldiers knocking at least five of them down. “Hah! Now it

explodes.” As she made an explosion sound, I good naturally reached over and knocked over a few more of my surrounding ponies. She gave an approving nod as she scooped up a few nearby toys, jumped off the table, and inched them closer. Once they reached my bed the war was over.

It really was a stroke of luck we even managed to get these army ponies. One of the infrequent trade caravans came down a little over a month ago boasting about its supply. Wildfire had jokingly asked if he had any foal toys but didn't really expect any. Yet as soon as she said that the merchant had a tub of army ponies ready to be paid for. Toys were hard enough to find in the wasteland, so we hurriedly picked them up, along with a small thing of paint so we would have two armies instead of one. They may have been colt toys, but Foundation was more than happy to play at war.

When it was my turn again I flicked a broken pencil at her line, but I hit it too hard. It flew above the closest ponies and hit uselessly against the floor. Foundation took this as a sign of her victory and declared, “Since you missed, I get to shoot twice.” Of course she did. Her first shot destroyed all but a single pony on my bed, and she just beamed up at me. “I'm going to beat you, now.”

“Oh?” with a deft hoof I snatched the remaining pony. “It's time for a tactical retreat.” Wildfire snickered as I placed the pony behind me on the bed.

“Hey!” she leaned to the side trying to look around me to see the toy. “No fair, you're in the way.”

“I am? Really. Whatever will you do? I guess it's a draw then.” The filly narrowed her ruby eyes and pushed her mane out of her face. “Or not?”

“I got this.” She grabbed a half-broken soldier toy that was serving artillery duty and tossed it up into the air. As it started to fall she turned around and bucked. Her hoof connected sharply and sent the shell over my head. I followed it in awe as it bounced off the ceiling, into a wall, and finally hit the pony behind my back knocking it over. “Heh.” She smirked. “That was awesome.”

“Huh...” I traced the trajectory with my eyes and looked back at my filly in amazement. “How did you do that?”

“It's a secret!” she blurted out. “An earth pony secret!”

“Sweetie.” Wildfire trotted over to her, careful to avoid stepping on any toys, and kissed the top of her head. “We're all earth ponies.”

“Oh...” She looked up at me again. “I don't know. Just did. It's like. In my brain I knew it'd work!” She smiled. “Momma used to say it was earth pony magic... oh... I mean.” She flushed and looked down at the floor, her long mane falling over her face. “Not you Momma, or Mommy.” I was Momma, and Wildfire was Mommy. “Old Momma. She used to say that...” her voice trailed off as she dug at the floor with a hoof.

It always happened like this. When we first took her in she was constantly shy around us, and refused to let other ponies even look at her. Over time we got it so she was able to be more open with us, and was able to actually talk to other ponies. She didn't like talking to other ponies, and was really shy around them but it was improvement. Once anypony mentioned her old life though, she would just get really sad and revert to how she was before, if only for a little bit.

We had tried to get her to talk to us about what happened, but she just couldn't. It wasn't that she didn't want to, but every time she started to describe the day when her village was attacked she would just start crying, and no amount of comforting would make her feel better. After a while we decided to wait until she was older, but it just hurt to see her like that. Wildfire suggested seeing if we could find a psychologist outside of Marefort, but neither of us had the faintest idea where to look for one. We did ask a few of the merchants who came by, but they were entirely unhelpful.

“Foundation...” I said softly, reaching out for her. “Are you okay?”

The filly didn't react as I stroked her mane.

“Foundation.” Wildfire looked down in confusion. Usually when she got like this she would either flinch away or hug us and cry. “Are you okay?” She brushed the filly's mane out of her face.

“Foundation!” she screeched.

Our daughter's face was cold and blue, and her eyes bloodshot. With a gasp I rushed over to her, cradling her in my forelegs. “No! You're going to be... to be...” her breaths were short and shallow, and for a second I thought she was trying to whisper something to me. “Please you have to be... you can't.” Tears stung my eyes. Even in my blurry vision I could see the length of rope tied tightly around her neck.

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My eye opened. The tent was bright with morning light, and it reminded me how long I'd slept, and how much I hated sleeping. With a groan, I pulled my pipbuck out from under me to check the time. Before noon at least, that was good. Looking away from the device and back around the tent I noticed, it was empty save for me. Pearly must have went to get Serenity breakfast... I knew this, but after the dream it twisted my gut into a knot.

I took a deep breath. Just needed to relax. To that end, I turned on my radio, but instead of turning it to New Haygas I flipped over to the Hizai special channel. Hopefully Flare was at Dise by now and told House that we needed help, so I listened to the channel to see if my orders had been updated. I was still fairly sure House was going to be pissed about everything that happened, but hopefully my information would prove useful.

The channel did more than just inform me: the gibberish of codes that I didn't understand also gave me a good chuckle and helped calm my nerves. Once the effects of the Nightmare were over, I had to admit I felt good. It had been so long since I got a proper sleep, and so long since I could just relax, I almost forgot what it felt like. Hopefully this was going to be trend, but I didn't count on it.

“*Star-Mare exodus Wishing Star.*” The word spoke into my implanted ear bud so quietly I almost missed them. Once I realized what was said I quickly flipped through my list of key words. 'exodus' roughly meant, 'will be assisted by agent'. So I guess whoever was designated 'Wishing Star' was going to come to my aid to help me get to Dise.

Just Wishing Star. Flare must have gotten to House if my orders had been changed, but I wasn't confident he understood the gravity of the situation. The Steel Rangers were ready to tear me apart limb from limb, and they had a way to track me. How as a single pony supposed to be able to assist me? I wouldn't turn down the help, especially not now that a NCA caravan might be caught in the crossfire, but I'd hoped for something a bit more substantial. Maybe House was annoyed at my incompetence and wasn't really trying to help me. If that was the case, I was lucky I got a single pony to help, so I guess beggars can't be choosers.

At that point, I'd been laying in bed so long I was sure I was going to get bedsores, so I rolled off the cot and trudged over to my equipment. Subtlety was as beautiful as ever, and it was a joy to help her onto my back once more. It was less of a joy when I realized I had set her up on my right side (again), and the eyepatch on that side made it impossible for me to, you know aim. So I had to take her off and put her back on correctly. Part of me wanted to just give up and take the eyepatch off, but when I did, I thought of Post Haste burning, and decided it should stay on, if only to remind me which paths not to go down.

“... is how I got my cutiemark.” When I heard Pearly's voice I realized I didn't have much time, so I

took out a Med-X, injected it, and put the empty vial back in my bag. A few seconds later she appeared through the tent flap with Serenity following along beside. After what happened the day before I was worried she and Pearly wouldn't get along, but I guess I was mistaken.

"I didn't even know apples could explode!" Wait, what? "Hey Momma!" She smiled and trotted over to me. "I changed my mind, Pearly is pretty awesome!"

I looked over to the white unicorn. "Well," she looked abashed, "she heard my voice when she was with *her*." Yes, Nanny Jane. No other pony I killed deserved it more. "So she thought I was working with her, when I explained I tried to barge downstairs to see what she was hidin' an was turned 'way, she changed her mind." That made a lot of sense. "I just... wish I could'a gotten Serenity out of there. I thought *she* was doing something, but if I had known it was that bad..."

"You couldn't have known..." I shook my head and looked over to Serenity. Her smile had faded at the talk, but she didn't seem too distraught. I was really going to need to take that filly into therapy. Maybe the Watchers had a program I could use.

"Yeah. It's fine Pearls." Serenity smiled. "Anyway, now that Momma is finally awake, we should get ready. The loud ghoul been sayin' we need'a pack up."

"Right. Have you seen Flare?" My filly shook her head as she went over to her side of the tent. "Damn." I'd hoped he had started to make his way back... of course he had no idea where we were so even if he did, he wouldn't be able to find us. Hopefully he wasn't flying around Caledonia looking for us. He was probably smart though and just waiting by Dise. So long as the message got through everything was good. Well, as good as it ever got.

With a sigh (I sighed way to much) I turned back around to Pearly... to find her extremely close. "Uh." She nuzzled at the un-scarred side of my face. "W-what are you doing?" Why did it seem so many mares delighted in seeing me blush?

"You know, hon, it is a shame you slept for so long. I had plans for what we could do to pass the time. And what plans they were." I tried my best to not focus on the sultry tone in her voice as I looked over to make sure Serenity was not paying attention.

"Why?" I pulled my head back. After the dream I was in a decidedly un-sexy mood. "I'm not pretty. Never was. Look worse now." The mare carefully brushed her hoof across my scars making my mouth twitch.

"Well." She seemed to be looking past me. "It was never your face I was interested in." She grew a sly smile as she looked at something past my face. "I swear that thing is a lethal weapon."

"What are yo-" I cut myself off when I realized what exactly she was staring at. "Oh... uh." And I blushed harder.

With a cunning smile she pulled away from me. "Sorry, hon, it's just seeing a big mare like you blush like a school filly. It's adorable." I had been called many things, but adorable was not one of them. That might have had something to do with the fact I was a giant freak of nature, rippling with muscles, thick of body and thick of head. In essence, if you took everything cute, and flipped it, you would get me.

Some ponies just had weird tastes.

"Stop hittin' on my momma," Serenity said super seriously as she walked over to us.

"I was flirtin' with her, not hittin' on her."

"What?" She tilted her head. "What's the diff'rence."

"Semantics." She gave a grin before trotting over to gather her supplies. "Let's go. That ghoul you were

talking to yesterday was giving me the stink eye, so I think he wants to see you.” Lovely, another chat with Lucky, just what I wanted. “I say we avoid him. He's hardly a pleasant stallion to be around.” She wrinkled her nose.

“I'm not sure I can.” Because when I spoke to him I had the unfortunate responsibility of talking to him as a representative of the Hizai, the same way he spoke to me with the authority of the NCA. Like it or not, my position gave me a sort of authority and obligation that I couldn't pass up just because he was unpleasant. “Sorry.”

“It's fine, hon, ah get it. You've got to do your duty.” She chuckled. “Ah still find it hard to believe you're working for a pony like Mr. House. I've only been to Dise a handful'a times in my life, but even ah can tell that House there is a big name, an' only works with the best... not that you're bad, hon, just...”

I was about to tell her not to worry about it when Serenity chirped in. “Actually! She got hired 'cause she had really noticeable cybernetics, and on her own she was givin' House a bad rap, an he wanted to curtail that.” She grinned, apparently quite pleased with herself.

“Thanks, Serenity.” I deadpanned as Pearly nickered. It wasn't like I was that bad before meeting House, I did manage to assassinate one of the top gang leaders in the city without anypony catching me, and even the ones who suspected it was me didn't know why I did it. Sure, it may not have been the cleanest kill, but I got the job done.

Of course, jobs like that were just going to get more and more difficult. I was able to get to Roy because he didn't know who I was, and didn't suspect that Lucky had hired me to kill him before hand. So when I set up the cards in order to get him to fall without breaking any of my contracts, and without implicating me in the crime (Molly was still the prime suspect for obvious reasons), he didn't stand a chance. Now, however, I was known by nearly every major gang leader at least in passing, and I wouldn't be able to hide my affiliation. Which meant jobs like that would have to be played without getting directly involved.

Still, killing Roy was my proudest moment. Not the actual killing (as epic as it was) but getting no less than three gang leaders to do what I wanted in order to facilitate the killing. Sure there was some ambiguity over what Mayhem knew, and Molly had gone behind my back, but it was still a fairly effective operation. Of course, none of that was news, but damn it made me smile to think about. If only I could achieve a similar effectiveness with my current gambit.

If I could actually get the different groups I helped to fight the Steel Rangers, and waste all their resources against each other to maintain the delicate equilibrium (Serenity taught me that word!) that kept Dise stable, then I was pretty sure that elevated me to Dise power player. Some ponies liked to compare politics to poker. They say it's about keeping your hand hidden, bluffing, and knowing when to fold. That was close, but not quite, because in Poker you can see all the players at the table, and who would suspect the dumb muscle actually had her own plans?

“Are you coming, hon?”

I, er, what? With a shake of my head, I was back in the world of reality, instead of living in a world where I was a genius and everything went according to plan. It was a nice dream though.

“You're not?”

“Yes, I mean no. Or...” Serenity smirked at me as I shut my mouth and started to follow them into the camp. “Sorry. Lost in thought.” If Flare was there he would have made a crack about smelling smoke. But he wasn't, so I got off without a single insult, and that meant my ego could run wild.

The NCA camp was fairly busy, with ponies running every which way. Apparently the trip south was a big deal as one in three ponies seemed ready to head out, leaving the outpost with only a small contingent. Either that or all these ponies were from elsewhere, and just meeting here for the final leg of the journey, and the contingent here was always supposed to be small.

Then I remembered I didn't actually care about NCA troop movements! And my life made sense again.

We found Lucky talking with a rather large stallion. Lucky's friend was a green I couldn't imagine existing in nature, and his mane was a yellowish orange. He was wearing the standard NCA military blue barding, but he had four golden stars in the shape of a diamond above a fancy looking symbol on his right foreleg. The stallion seemed to be in a good mood, laughing and patting Lucky on the back. Lucky didn't seem to approve of the touch.

When we approached, Lucky looked over at us in relief, "Ah, here she comes." He looked back at the stallion. "General Scoiatel, may I present to you Hired Gun, of the Hizai." At the introduction I strode forward. "Hired Gun, this is General Scoiatel, one of the five Generals of the NCA, commander of the Crest Division, and second in command after Major General Hailstorm herself. He arrived last night, but you were sleeping." All of that sounded very fancy, but I didn't really understand.

The green stallion looked me up and down and whickered in approval. "I say. That is some fancy ironwork you have upon your leg."

"Uh... thanks..." I wasn't sure what to do with somepony like him. He was clearly a pony of importance, but I was bad at showing reverence.

"What model is that, good mare? I must know." His smile was fake, and his attitude irritated me. Also I forgot what model that was.

"It's a Series 19-B." Serenity was suddenly beside me and grinning. "The Series 19 was the 19th iteration of Cybernetics used in pre-war Caledonia, and's called the most reliable even though five more came out after. The -B classification indicates it is using a modified version to include a leg extender for taller soldiers. If yer wonderin', the -A class was a popular retractable blade." She looked at my leg and then back up to the general. "Technically, this is a replica of a Series 19-B cybernetic foreleg. Mr. House made it special for Hired 'cause she was already used to the model, but hers broke..." she looked harder at my leg. "I'm pretty sure the original leg was made'a steel, while this appears'ta be an aluminium alloy. I really need'a ask House ta make sure, otherwise I could be gettin' maintenance wrong."

General Scoiatel looked a bit shocked at the filly's loud and long interruption. "I say. Your... mechanic, I take it? I am surprised they come so young... she's not a slave is she?" He tsked at me before I could answer.

"My adopted daughter." I might have said that a bit defensively. "She really likes cybernetics."

"Of that I am quite aware." He knelt down with a smile. "So you're a little mechanic are you?" Serenity put on a stubborn face and nodded. "Tell me, little dear, why do you like cybernetics?"

"Because they're cool!" The stallion laughed and started to stand up, apparently expecting just that.

"And they make ponies better." Serenity added when he was halfway to standing, making him stop in place in an odd, hunched-over position. "Ponies're flesh and bone and hair, and that stuff's good. But sometimes it's not good 'nough. With this technology we c'n become better than our bodies, beyond our limitations! Weak ponies can be made strong, dumb ponies can be made smart. We all get better, an' when we're all better the world is too."

"I see..." he said slowly. "You are a precocious little scamp aren't you?" What? "You, Miss Hired, I

must say she must be a hoof-full, wot?" I looked at Lucky to see if he could help me, but the ghoul just gave me a knowing nod before leaving me to the crazy pony by vanishing into the crowd. "I say, let's walk and talk. It's a glorious day, and we are just about ready to be on our merry way."

"Sure... can they-"

"Yes, yes. Your filly, and your marefriend, can come. I'm sure anything I told you would be repeated soon after, wot." I... was not sure what to say to that, except to wonder how this pony became one of the highest-ranking officers in the NCA. Must have been magic, or he had connections. Or he had magical connections.

The three of us (Pearly came too, I think she found the whole situation hilarious because she wouldn't stop smirking) left the gate of the camp and started down the steep set of stairs. Looking down as we walked made my stomach twist, and it was really hard not to close my eyes. It wasn't a sheer drop, but it was steep enough and high enough that my phobia apparently thought it counted. It didn't help at all that the stairs were skinny and crowded with ponies heading down.

As we walked, Serenity lectured the military pony about the different types of cybernetic limbs. She gave a detailed description of how they connected to the nervous system and listed the pros and cons between feeling and unfeeling legs. She also remarked, frequently, about how cool it was to have swords in your leg. I had to agree with her on that part, but I was sure if I tried I'd end up stabbing ponies by accident. A lot of ponies.

When we reached the bottom the General asked an interesting question. "What about other types of cybernetics?"

"You mean like eye replacements? Or-" Serenity started but was cut off. That did not endear me to this pony.

"Combat augmentations. Stealth systems, reflex enhancers, muscle supplements to make ponies stronger, bone strengthening, dermal armour." He waved a hoof in a circle. "Things like that, wot."

"Huh, well. 'Course that sort'a stuff is on the market. My favourite is the high jump boosters. By augmenting the muscles used in jumping, combined with a focused blast of air and levitation talisman it allows ponies to jump nearly fifteen feet in the air!" I wasn't sure that was a combat cybernetic, but it sounded really cool. "But, it's like, anything like that tends ta be on tha expensive side, 'cause it requires more in-depth surgery and more delicate wiring. Heck, it's possible ta create a super soldier that's almost entirely cybernetic and eats gems to power themselves, but it's so expensive ta do, it would hardly be worth the investment."

"I see..."

"Why'da ya ask?"

"Curiosity." General Scoitel stopped near where a group of brahmin-pulled carts were waiting. "Does it hurt?"

"Yes." That was a fast answer. "It d'pends on tha pony a'course, but it hurts. Sometimes right after the surgery, sometimes forever and ever. It's delicate, and a single mistake can turn'a ponies life inta pain." The large stallion grimaced before placing a huge hoof on Serenity's head to ruffle her mane. Just in case, I had Subtlety trained on his head.

"You're a smart filly. Where are you from?" He said amicably before removing the hoof.

"From Eye Glow 'riginally, but grew up mostly in Dise with The Watchers." Serenity apparently got bored of the ground because she decided it was a great time to jump on my back, forcing me to stand sideways so we could both see Scoiatel.

“The Watchers?” The stallion was unconvinced. “From the reports I have seen, The Watchers have never properly approved of cybernetics.”

“Yer reports are wrong... or wrongish. They're mostly wrong-like. Ya see, you got 'The Watchers' who're the group what gives out medical supplies an' treatment for near as free as ya can get, then ya got 'The Church Of The Watcher.' Them's the ones what worship The Watcher, an' The Watcher is basically Celestia after tha war. Somethin' bout she doesn't interact with us anymore cause we disappointed her an now she watches and waits for us'ta get back on tha right path.”

“They're related to Celestia's Promise, right? The ponies who protest Mr. House, and tried to throw the zebras out of Karkhoof?”

“Celestia's Vision.” Serenity corrected. That was good to remember, I could never seem to get it right. “They're an offshoot that wants a force others ta turn ‘way from their sins forcefully.” She took a deep breath. “Jeez, you keep makin' me talk so much I'm gettin' light headed! Anyway, like I was sayin' 'The Watchers' themselves don't mind cybernetics, but summa them what are affiliated dislike, so their use'a em are on the down low. They used to work mostly with Mr. House, but lately contract out ta Cerberus.” Sometimes I forgot that my filly lived in Dise much longer than me, and had a deeper understanding of how it worked. At least when it came to The Watchers.

“I see...” He nickered in approval. “I need to go tend to some business, I say, but since you've been so helpful hows-about I let you ride in the cart instead of walk.” Serenity grinned and nodded despite clearly not intending to walk at all when she had a momma-taxi. “Good show! I'll get it all set up then, I say this has been quite enlightening, wot!”

The large stallion gave his best fake smile before trotting off into the crowd, leaving us standing there a bit dumbfounded. I for one had no idea how I was supposed to comment on what just happened. “So... hon, does this happen often?” I turned my head over to Pearly who was standing quietly. “I mean, big name ponies walking up to you asking for favours.” Every damn day.

“More than ya'd think,” Serenity said proudly. “Momma is popular.”

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Just as promised, the three of us got a cart to travel during the ride. Other than once or twice when soldiers came back to make sure nothing was missing (I'm not a trustful-looking pony), we were left to our own devices. It was a long and mostly boring trip, and while a few times the line stopped and I heard gunfire in the distance, it never lasted long. Probably just mutated animals following the large group hoping for a free meal.

Flare was dearly missed during the trip because, while Pearly was an okay story teller, she didn't really have the spunk that made Flare's tales so endearing, so we ended up listening to the radio for most of the journey. With all the repeated songs, and occasionally repeated news, that started to grate on my nerves too. At least it was better than listening to the memories of my past like in the Reconstruction Facility. I guess that was one good thing about that place. No matter how much things annoyed me, I could look to that place and remember that things could always be worse.

Eventually the group stopped, and we made camp. There was a meagre meal given out, but for the most part we slept through the night, to be ready for the next long day. Of course, when I say 'we' I actually meant Pearly and Serenity. I, for one, was in no mood for sleep after my dream the night before, so I laid on my back staring up at the stars.

They had been there for weeks by that point, but I had never really looked at them before. Sure, I'd seen them, but I never really looked. They were like little diamonds dotting the sky between clouds. There was something mysterious about them, a forlorn sense that no matter how hard I tried I would

never really be able to understand what they were. At least they were pretty.

With my metal leg I reached out and tried to touch them. I didn't get close, of course, but I tried. It was funny to think that no matter how hard I tried I could never reach them, but they could come down to reach me. My leg was testament to that. A star fell a long time ago, was made into a bullet, shot into my leg, killing it and nearly me, and here I was trying to reach out to them with my replacement. It was a little bit silly, but even more than that it left me feeling small. No matter how hard I reached I could never come close to a star, but they could ruin my life without really trying.

I put my hoof back but I didn't look away. Despite all that, I liked the way they looked fading between the shifting clouds. The way they twinkled and sparkled. Maybe I should have gone to sleep, because I clearly was not thinking right.

“Hey...” A soft voice said beside me. “You're still awake, hon?”

“Yeah...” I closed my eyes. “Yeah.” Then opened them again. No way I was going to sleep. There was a shuffling in the cart before something pressed onto my chest, and I felt a warm breath. “What're you doing?”

“Ya know, for all that muscle you're still comfortable.” In the darkness I hoped she couldn't see me blush.

“Pearly...”

“Ya know,” she said softly, her breath tingling against my chest, “for all I make ya blush, I've been gettin' tha feelin' ya ain't interested in me.” Oh shit. “Or am ah wrong? 'Cause when we first met ya seemed a lot more... reciprocal. To my advances.” With a sigh I carefully put a hoof on her back and slowly rubbed up and down her spine.

“Why do you even like me?” I didn't want to look at her. She was nice, but it was true I wasn't really interested in her. Beyond the blushing, I didn't feel for this mare. Maybe if I never met Platinum Haze I would have given her a chance but... that just made me feel worse. Like I was shallow, and couldn't accept a mare who wasn't an alicorn or something.

“Now, normally, hon, you'd have to answer my question first. But 'cause you asked so nice...” she paused and sighed. “I ain't sure. You seem like a nice mare, big'n'strong, and I've always liked my mares with some meat on their bones. You're not pretty, but you got heart, and I guess I just feel like we could make somethin' special.” I guess that made sense. “Ya gunna answer my question, or did ya just plan ta fluster and confuse this poor mare?”

“Sorry...” I said softly. “It's not you... I mean. I'm... a stupid mare. Big and dumb and stupid. With issues. So many issues.” I tried to say this very seriously. “You wouldn't like me. If you got to know me. Really. I'm not... I'm troubled and... and you would get hurt.”

“And you got yer eye on somepony else? Ah ain't gonna fall for that 'it's not you it's me' shit.” Aw, shit. “Though I'm sure you have issues. Can see it in your eyes.” It wasn't really fair to Pearly. Platinum Haze had seen a lot of my issues first hoof, and while she thankfully stayed away from Foundation, it gave her enough of an insight to understand me.

“Sorry...”

She nuzzled my chest, making my stomach flutter. “Don't be. I mean, ain't like ya can help who ya find attractive. Believe me, for the longest time I tried to convince myself I wasn't a filly-fooler.” I couldn't help but laugh. “Hey! It's not funny hon, mocking a pretty mare after breaking her heart.”

“Oh... uh...”

"I'm teasing." She lightly swatted at my chest and laughed. "It was silly, but I learned my lesson. So I mean, ya can't help who you're attracted to, but doesn't mean ya shouldn't give others a chance. So... if it doesn't work put between you and this other pony, give me a call. Or we could just have crazy sex. I'm good at that. It'd melt your mind." Normally I would give a cry of indignation, but it'd been so long since I'd been mind melted, I just blushed furiously and imagined how that felt.

She must have felt my excitement, somehow, and stood up slightly to look me in the eyes, blocking my view of the stars. "What do you say, big mare? Just a fun night, no attachment, no expectations."

"Uh..." Her deep red mane fell over her face in front of her half-lidded eyes. She was really pretty and I squirmed at the thought. "Um." It was really hard to think with her looking at me like that. "Sorry." I hated myself. So much. I really, really, really, did. "I can't..." If Serenity weren't sleeping a few feet away from us, I probably would have agreed. She wanted me, and while I didn't want a relationship, I did want her, but... "My daughter..."

She gave an adorable pout and looked over to the sleeping filly. With an exaggerated sigh she laid back down and returned her head to my chest. "I understand, hon, maybe another time. Until then, I claim rights to use you as a pillow." I returned my hoof to its comforting rubbing on her back as I cursed my decision. Sometimes I was just really stupid. "Not sure how I feel about you rubbin' me down after rejectin' me." I er, what. I carefully lifted my hoof. "I'm just teasing, hon. You're too easy."

"You're really not mad?"

She nickered. "Mad? No. I could never be mad 'cause a pony made a reasonable choice... I'm upset though. Not at you, just, you know. I want you ta be happy, but I'd be happy if ya said yes."

"I know... but..."

"Your daughter, I understand." I stared back up at the stars to clear my mind. "You know, when I heard you adopted her, I wasn't sure. You're not always the nicest pony, hon, and you're not sharp. No offence but, well you know." Yeah. "But you really care for her, don'tcha? That means a lot, I think. So I'm not that mad you turned me down. It was to do right by her, and that poor filly deserves it." Serenity deserved more than me, she deserved everything. If I could pluck the stars from the sky and give them to her I would... then I remembered my metal leg and decided that might not have been the best idea.

"They're pretty," I said stupidly.

"What, hon?" Pearly replied sleepily.

"The stars. Look." She tilted her head towards the sky and a smile formed on her muzzle.

"Yeah... yeah they are."

We just rested there in the starlight and thought of better times. Eventually, Pearly fell asleep on my chest, her breath blowing at my coat. She really was a beauty, and no sane mare would've have turned her down. Too bad she had to ask me. With a sigh, I turned and looked up at the stars and stayed awake. I didn't want to sleep, sleep made the nightmares come, and I was too content to let them take that moment away from me.

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The morning came and I must have fell asleep at least for a little bit because Pearly was nudging me awake. After thanking Celestia that I didn't have any dreams, I opened my eyes. Our personal cart was on the move already, at least judging by the way I was bumping along. My head was pounding, and my sweaty mane was sticking to my face. I hated morning.

"Wake up, sleepy." Pearly nudged me. "Some ponies brought breakfast. They seemed annoyed we got

to ride. Why do we get to ride, hon?"

"Hizai." I rolled over and started nosing through my bag looking for... well it was pretty obvious what I was looking for. "Special privileges. House always wins. Blah blah blah." I jammed the vial of Med-X into my leg. As soon as the medication hit I let out a sigh of relief. In an instant it felt as if all my worries had washed away, and ponies wondered why I used this stuff.

"Hon..." Oh yeah, Pearly was there. Judging me. "What are you doin'? Are ya hurt?"

"I'm coping." Oh, and I was coping so well.

"Hon..." She started but I really didn't want to hear it.

"Remember my face." I poked at the scar tissue. "It helps with that. And the constant surgery. Lots of cybernetics. Little rehab. Okay? Is that good enough? Fuck." She looked a bit shocked and just slid over a meagre plate of food. I ate it slowly, and it did nothing to improve my mood. Why couldn't ponies just let me have that one thing that actually stopped me from feeling like shit. Was that so much to ask?

Pearly was a bit distant after that... I didn't mean to offend her, or to get mad, it was just annoying that every other pony in the wastes could have their own vices, but I wasn't allowed. Because obviously I was too dumb to know what I was getting myself into. Not like I tricked a god or anything.

My mood only improved slightly when Serenity awoke. I wasn't entirely sure why Pearly frustrated me so much that not even Serenity could pull me out of it. Chances were I would have to apologize by the time the day was over, but at the time I just felt like fuming. Serenity's a smart filly, always quick on the uptake, so she realized my malaise and spent her time playing with Scootaborg and annoying, I mean talking to, the pony leading the brahmin pulling the cart.

Pearly didn't talk to me for a while after that, and instead rested as far away as she could from me (The cart was fairly small, and full of other supplies as well.) reading a book. A few times I caught her looking over at me with sad eyes, but I pretended not to notice. I really didn't want to have another fight, if it could even be called a fight. If one side is a raging bitch for no reason, is it a fight? I was going to have to apologize, I knew, but I didn't want to despite it all.

Eventually my scowl faded and I looked over to Pearly. She was still staring at the book in front of her. "Listen." She flipped a page with her magic (my shoulder burned, but this should not be news), waited a second, then looked over. "Sorry."

She smiled sweetly. "It's fine, hon." She turned back to her book. Well that was anticlimactic. "You've had a rough week. But you shouldn't blow up at your friends. For next time." She didn't sound angry, but she certainly felt angry. With a sigh, I just let it go. It just wasn't worth pushing. I'd said my piece, and now we just both had to cool down.

Sometimes I sound reasonable, and that is just scary.

With nothing better to do, I hefted up my pipbuck and flicked on the radio to Mr. New Haygas. If nothing else, his soothing voice would help calm my mind. "*Well, hello there Wasteland, have I got news for you. Hold onto your hats because I'm about to lay it on yo-*"

"Momma..." My radio show was interrupted by something far more important. Without a second thought, I flicked off the radio and looked down at my filly. "Can we talk, I uh, need'a ask a question. Might be 'portant." I nodded and Serenity and looked over at Pearly. She got the hint and inched further away, pretending not to eavesdrop.

"What's wrong, Serenity?" She seemed reluctant, so I wrapped a leg around her and pulled her in close.

I think it helped, but I was never really sure.

“Um, do ya remember back at Bridle Hope hope, Uncle Meadow... or... your brother.” She wrinkled her muzzle, “Can I call him Uncle?” There was no way around this, so I just nodded. “Uncle Meadow said somethin' 'bout me bein' yer 'New' daughter. Don't that mean you had an 'old' daughter too?” Just then, the cart shuddered to a stop, and my heart mimicked it.

Shit.

Shit shit shit. And might I just add, shit.

There was no good way to have this discussion. None whatsoever. No matter how this talk went, it was going to go badly. At best she'd think I was irresponsible, and at worst she'd leave me altogether after losing all faith in me. How could I tell her that? Some secrets are best kept in the dark. But how could I lie to her? After everything we'd been through, I didn't think I could do it to the filly. Not now, when she seemed so concerned.

“Uh...” My heart pounded against my chest so loud I could hear it, and I could feel a cold sweat start down my back. “Um...” My stomach twisted itself into knots, and my mouth felt really dry.

“Momma? A-are you okay. You look pale.” Fine. Just fine. I was just a helpless pawn in a game bigger than I could imagine, risking my life for ideals I didn't believe in, all the while putting a filly I couldn't protect into danger time and time again. How was I supposed to save one, when I couldn't save the other. What gave me the right to drag Serenity into danger as visions of lengths of rope invaded my every waking thought. How could I-

“Momma you're shaking.” No... I wasn't shaking I was panicking. There was a difference. “M-momma...”

“Yes.” Yes I had an old daughter. And then she... “Yes. Long ago.” It was not that long ago, and it most certainly was not long enough. “I...” Felt like running away. I hated that feeling. Every sense felt more real, everything I saw reminded me of my past. I just needed something, anything, to connect me back to reality. Where I was a big strong assassin, not a helpless mare watching as her child...

“What happened to her...?” Serenity said quickly before realizing her mistake and clamping a hoof over her mouth. “Ah mean! Ya don't need'a... I was just... don't be upset...”

“Sorry.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The breath filled up my chest, and I held it so long it started to sting. I focused on that sensation, the twinge of pain as my body called out for breath. Slowly I let out a long slow breath before inhaling deep once more. The rhythm helped. It gave me focus, a place to ground myself. Force back the memories and all the emotions that came with them. It wasn't easy, but I couldn't cry in front of Serenity.

“Sorry.” Inhale. Exhale. “It's not... a happy story.” Inhale. Exhale. “I'll tell you some day.” Inhale. Exhale. “But... not today. Please.” Inhale. Exhale. “So another time.” Inhale. Exhale. “But...” Inhale. Exhale. “Serenity... no matter what.” Inhale. Exhale. “I still love you.” Inhale. Exhale. “With all of my heart.”

Inhale. Exhale.

“I... I gotcha momma. Sorry. I didn't mean'a...” She hugged me hard. “I love'ya too. Sorry about what happened to... her...” I winced a bit too much and she looked up in shock. “Oh, I'm...”

“It's fine.” I reached down and mused up her mane. “Really.” she nodded sadly and let go of me.

“I'm just... I'll be workin' on Scootaborg. So ya can think or... whatever...” She bit her lower lip, took one last look, and trotted off.

That... could have gone better. I was still not calm by any sense of the word, but I was no longer freaking out. And at least I figured I had sated Serenity's curiosity for the time being. With any luck she would never bring up Foundation again... though I was sure she would. It was in her nature to be curious. At the very least, then, she didn't completely hate me for my repeated failures as a mother, at least not yet.

I banged my head against the bottom of the cart with a heavy thunk. The thoughts were coming back. What I really needed was something, anything to distract me from them. Thankfully, for once, Celestia heard my prayers.

“HIRED GUN!” Of course the distraction she sent me was Major Lucky. I'm not sure if that was a good thing or not. “Get your ass up.” I lifted my head up and turned to the ghoul. He was as ugly as he ever was, and looked none too pleased. Not that he ever looked pleased. “General Scoitel wants to see you, now.” Judging by the way he spoke I could tell he would brook no questioning.

“Okay...” I slowly got to my hooves and jumped off the cart. He seemed a little surprised that I didn't ask him anything, but I was really not in the mood. I'd just listen and follow and let whatever was going on overpower the conflict in my head.

The caravan was one of the largest I'd seen. Not for the amount of supplies brought along, but by the sheer number of soldiers accompanying it. Of course when you're escorting a high ranking General and a famous Major, you make sure you have enough ponies around to frighten away any threat. Not even the dumbest raiders would risk attacking so many ponies. The only things that would even try to attack would be monsters, and even most of those were smart enough to steer clear.

As we walked forward through the mass of ponies, I noticed I could see Dise. Its towers and skyscrapers stuck into the sky like a dirty splotch on the horizon. The largest tower stared at me still. No matter which direction I was from Dise, the giant pink pony head always seemed to be looking at me with its glowing eyes.

When we got to our destination though, I realized I'd much more dangerous glowing eyes to deal with, because standing there blocking the road were two Steel Rangers. One of the steel rangers was a small green mare in a brown scribe's robe, and though she had a grenade machine gun on her back my EFS marked her amber. The other though was showing a red tick though, and on his armoured back was a... thing. It was made of a long tube cut in half so the bottom part was carrying a strange glowing ball, and the top was open to the air. I may have been wrong, but it looked like it was a type of catapult to throw whatever that glowing ball was. As we got closer though, my shoulder started to throb and ache, and I knew what that glowing ball was.

“They have a megaspell!” I whispered hurriedly to Lucky.

“A Balefire Egg.” A what? “And a B.E.L. It's the only reason we haven't just killed them.” Part of me had to wonder if that toy wasn't one of the weapons they found hidden in the facility. This was exactly why I needed to tell the other gangs, to even the odds. Because right now it simply was not fair. Though I had to enjoy the irony of the last remnant of the Equestrian army having to take supplies from a Caledonian military facility in order to survive. That's irony right? I'm not sure what irony means.

“I say, here she comes now.” General Scoitel did not smile at me when I approached as he had the last time we spoke. “This is the mare you're looking for, wot?”

The Steel Ranger who was carrying the weapon so large I was sure he was overcompensating looked at me. “What is your name?” It sounded like he found the whole thing very amusing. His scribe, however, didn't seem amused at all. She stared at me with a determined look.

“Hired Gun,” I said sharply.

“Yes, you are, aren't you. Did you really think you could escape?” Apparently somepony had been taking Blackwater lessons.

“Actually, yes.” Doing verbal battle with idiot Steel Rangers really helped clear my mind. “And I did. In fact, I've escaped twice, now. Your record is shaky.”

“Yes, Elder Blackwater has noticed this. Which is why I'm not here to capture you.” He was here to kill me, and the scribe was going to take my pipbuck off my corpse just in case. I hated it when ponies finally smartened up, but it was about time they started realizing I always escaped. Usually in some brilliantly fantastic show of wits. Or shooting. Either way.

“Oh.” I did my best to sound upset, but I was a bad actor. “Is that what that thing is for?” I waved my cybernetic leg at his weapon.

“This is a B.E.L. It shoots miniature balefire bombs. And by ‘miniature,’ I mean it'd still kill every pony here and leave their corpses irradiated.” I already knew that. “I brought it to make sure whoever was harbouring you would give you up...” He paused. “And because, well, you survived that Facility and managed to escape. Blackwater wants to make absolutely sure you're dead this time. You might call it overkill, she'd call it assurance.”

I grimaced just a little bit before looking over to Major Lucky. “Tell me. How well did balefire kill you?”

The Major actually laughed and lifted up a ghoulish hoof. “Well. It killed me. I just got better.”

“So, whoever you are,” I addressed the steel clad ranger. I would taunt the scribe too, but her intense look was kind of off putting. “Do your worst. And when you're done? I'll climb out of the crater. Fight my way through every last one of you. And kill Blackwater myself. You tell her that. Tell her you killed me. And that I'm going to kill her back.”

Truth be told, I'd no plans to die easily. It was clear to me that the NCA had sold me out, but I couldn't really blame them. It was either they gave me up, or he'd bomb the entire caravan into submission and kill me anyway. Sure, it sucked, but I wouldn't hold that against them. Not that it mattered. I resolved not to die. Serenity still needed me, Flare still needed me, and Dise needed me to stop them. I didn't go through that hell of a facility only to die like a chump.

“Sorry, Hired. I hate to do this, but...” The General looked at me with a frown. “I am charged with the protection of my ponies, and right now it's between you or them.” If the entire caravan fired, they would be able to take down the one Steel Ranger, but not before he got a shot off, and that one shot would be devastating. My life wasn't worth that, not to him anyway.

“It's fine.” I said. I still had Subtlety, and she could pierce Steel Ranger armour. All I'd to do was follow him along, then kill him before he got a chance to fire. If he tried to take her from me I would just jump him and smash his skull in. It has been proven multiple times that while Steel Ranger armour is tough, it's not tough enough to stop me, but of course few things were.

“You.” The Scribe spoke and suddenly everyone looked at her. The small green mare was still looking at me with strangely focused eyes. “What is your designation?”

“Shut up, Breeze,” the armoured ranger hissed.

“What is your designation?” she repeated. Her voice seemed to lack inflection, and was creepy enough no pony stopped her.

“I'm a Hizai.”

She nodded and repeated, “What is your designation?”

“Hired Gun?”

“What is your designation?”

“Silver Storm.”

“What is your designation?”

It was then it hit me what she was asking for. With a sly smile I nodded knowingly to the scribe and said, “Star-Mare.” Then I asked her, “What is your designation?”

She whispered, “Wishing Star.” Her leg suddenly shot out sideways (I wasn't sure ponies could move like that), as a blade shot out from it. The cold steel slammed into the Steel Ranger's armour piercing it just enough for him to cry out. Before the stallion could retaliate, the mare jumped and twisted in a way that shouldn't have been possible. She landed on the Ranger's back with all four legs stabbing into him.

“Fuck! Get off! Fuck, shoot, shoot dammit.” Everyone was too stunned to move. He was trying to fire, but couldn't. “Get off, Breeze!” He tried to struggle, but it looked like his armour was starting to shut off.

The mare was silent as she lifted reared up on his back, her bloody blades glinting in the sunlight, and drove her hooves into the back of the stallion's head. There was a sickening crunch, a gasp, and slight shudder from the stallion before he fell over into a heap. Blood pooled around his lifeless body from his wounds.

“What the hell are you!” Major Lucky demanded to know as the mare strode forward. The mare ignored him, and instead ripped off the scribe's cloak and started towards me.

As she moved, she started to... change. Her green coat shimmered and faded revealing a deep golden coat hidden partially under a plethora of cybernetics. All four of her legs turned from pony legs to deep black metal legs that seemed to be made from many plates of shifting metal, and designed to look almost pony like, if only from a distance. Her torso seemed mostly pony-like, save for a metal line running down her spine, and a few instances of wiring that had reached the surface. When she stared at me I say her eyes were glowing green like mine, and in her mouth were many metal teeth. Of course, the most noticeable change was the face she was not a mare, but a stallion. The green mare called 'Breeze' was gone, and in her place was a black and gold cyber-pony who was undoubtedly a Hizai.

“You are Designation Star-Mare.” It was not a question, but a statement. “I have been instructed to escort you to Mr. House.” I realized that when I had felt magic before, it wasn't just the B.E.L., but also whatever magic he was using to make that disguise.

“How did you do that?!” Just looking at him made me feel self-conscious about my low-grade cybernetics.

“That information is classified.” He paused and stared into space. “I am allowed to inform you the disguise system is based off of Changeling magic.” Changelings? I'd always thought they were just a myth. Of course back in Marefort, I'd thought pegasi were a myth too.

“I mean. To...” I looked at the dead body.

“I disconnected the wiring to his battle-saddle in his helmet. I then damaged the powering system in his back. Then I killed him. Do you have another enquiry?” He stood eerily still as we spoke. The other ponies who had been watching just sort of stared.

“You're a Hizai.”

Other ponies would have looked at me like I was an idiot (Major Lucky and General Scoitel actually did), but he simply nodded. “Affirmative. Our mission is to escort you to Mr. House. You are currently

not authorised to know the nature of our previous missions.” You know what, I was good with that. Flare did good getting the word to Mr. House. Now if only I knew where he was. It wasn't like him to leave and not come back.

“I say, good show.” General Scoitel walked over. “You did good, son, really had us going.” The General had returned to his amiable facade, and tried to pat Wishing Star on the back.

The Stallion slid away faster than he had any right. “I request you do not touch me, or else I will be forced to retaliate.” He turned his head to look the General in the eyes. “You have Mr. Houses thanks for escorting designation Star-Mare. Mr. House requests you take us the remainder of the way.”

“Uh, Sure, son. You deserve it for that show.” The General backed off and whispered something to the Major.

“So...” The stallion snapped his head back to me as I spoke. “Your designation is Wishing Star. What is your name?”

“My name is whatever Mr. House desires it to be. I am designation Wishing Star, you are required to call me by this name.” I, okay. “Mr. House is curious as to the outcome of your mission. It is hoped you did not disappoint.” He was really starting to creep me out.

“I'll, uh, inform him. Upon. Arrival.” That was fancy right? “Uh. I'll take you... to our cart.” If nothing else, it'd be amusing to see Serenity beg to take him apart and see how he ticked.

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Serenity did not disappoint. Her reaction upon seeing Wishing Star was something between a gasp, a squeal, and a cry of excitement. I had to physically stop her so she wouldn't touch him. After a little bit of coaxing to both of them, Wishing Star agreed to let her study the cybernetics on the condition that she did not, under any circumstance, touch them. So for the remainder of the ride Pearly and I watched Serenity interrogate the poor cyborg.

Most importantly though, Wishing Star let me take the B.E.L and keep it. It was one of the happiest days of my life.

After the cybernetic inspection and brahmin-pulled cart ride, we finally made it back to Dise. We stood before the great wall that surrounded the city. How long had I been away from the city? It felt like forever. There was so much I had to do now that I was back, so many ponies I had to talk to. Before, I'd tried to escape the city, but now it kept drawing me back. It was, for better or worse, my home, so I had to get used to that.

The Ponitrons at the front gate let Wishing Star, Serenity, and me in, but they stopped Pearly. I gave her a few caps, told her where to find the casino-hotel-thing, and promised to help her get into the city once I got paid for the job. I'd have more than enough to ensure she got in, but after that I wasn't sure I would be able to get her a job.

Then we entered the city.

It was like walking into a different world. The sheer volume of ponies filled up my EFS almost instantly. Just being past the gate assaulted my senses: the neon lights of the hotels shining, the sweaty smell of a thousand ponies, the sounds of so many ponies talking, and the feeling of burning in my shoulder from the near constant abuse of magic. The wasteland was nice, but this was civilisation. The last refuge of ponykind. At least until the gang war, minotaurs, or secret conspiracy destroyed it. Of course, since this was Dise, I'm sure half the ponies had placed a bet on how exactly it would get destroyed.

The cyberpony escorted us to The BS, seemingly not noticing all the gawking ponies staring at him. It

was a fairly quiet walk (Flare still hadn't found us, and I was starting to get worried) as Wishing Star didn't seem to speak unless spoken to, Serenity was too busy staring at him like a filly with a crush (that'd better just be a simile, because Serenity was not allowed to have crushes) and I just rarely spoke. Or I tried not to.

Eventually we made our way up the BS, and waited in front of Mr. House's door.

"Momma," Serenity said, looking up very seriously as we waited. "You need more cybernetics." Somehow I knew that was coming. Before I could say anything she cut me off. "Not just 'cause they're cool, but they could help. Like when we were in the facility, and didn't have any weapons. If you had, like, a stealth system and blade arms, ya could'a tore those robots apart. There's a thousand different cybernetics you could have that'd help ya, and since you're already a cyborg, why not get more?" I guess that made sense.

"Maybe..." I looked over at Wishing Star who stood very still as we waited. As useful as I'm sure his cybernetics were, I was quite positive I didn't want to look like him. It wasn't because I was afraid of losing my identity as a pony (Honestly I thought ponies who thought that to be even stupider than me) but because I kind of liked physical touch, and I wasn't that fond of the cybernetic aesthetic. Not that there would be anything wrong with more subtle augmentations. "Did you have any suggestions?"

"Well ya might wanna cloaking system. Kinda like stealth-bucks, but it recharges based on yer power so it lasts longer. Maybe some sort'a auto-healer that injects health potions during fights. Oh, and definitely a sword leg! Those are super cool, and useful."

Wishing Star looked over at me. "I can confirm the versatility of said augment." That was a ringing endorsement. "Do you require our opinion?"

"Sure," I said. Serenity agreed with me by nodding excitedly. She apparently really wanted to hear what this cybernetic god had to say.

"I would suggest dermal armour. A combination of skin strengthening, and superdense armour plating under your hide. It'd decrease the damage done by bullets, and make you harder to injure..." He looked very seriously at me. "It is my understanding you are often hurt, and this would assist. In addition, you may find a stealth system useful." He suddenly lifted his head up. "Mr. House is free."

"How... do you know?" I looked around the hall. Then I remembered he was very cybernetically enhanced. "Radio system built in?" The stallion nodded. That made perfect sense, too. So I helped Serenity onto my back (She liked to be there when I was talking, so ponies would pay attention if she said something) put my new B.E.L and Subtlety outside the door (Shouldn't walk in on your boss ready to kill), and entered the room.

As we entered Mr. House turned off one of the panels on his huge computer system and turned to us. Actually, he turned to Wishing Star and nodded approvingly. "Wishing Star, report," he rasped, walking over to us.

"Yes, Sir." The cybernetic pony stood perfectly still as he spoke. "Our first assignment was to infiltrate the base of Baises and report on how Molly was able to hold onto power despite the dislike of her kind in the city. We found the information within three days of infiltration. The answer is real and legitimate threats to a pony resulting in death if her race is brought into question. Upon joining the organization I was given a video to watch. It has been recorded and I will present it here as it has been deemed clearance beta."

Without another word the stallion trotted over to the large screen in the far side of Mr. House's room (the one where House first tried to convince me he was just a head on a screen) and did something. It looked like he plugged a wire into his leg...

The screen flickered on and went fuzzy before changing. The scene appeared to be some sort of party around a large boardroom table and our view was from a security camera that showed the length of the table. The only pony I recognized was Molly at the head of the table, and only because I recognized her black hat. "We were informed that this was the day after Molly took control of the Baises when her mother passed away." Wishing told us.

The first part of the video was fairly normal. There was a party. Ponies were drinking, and talking, making it so loud I could barely hear what any one pony was saying. That was until one pony at the far end of the table slammed his hoof down. His was a green earth pony with a yellow mane, and could have been mistaken for Molly's brother had he been a mule. All at once the crowded quieted and the green mule at the end of the table lifted her hat up some. "Uncle, are you upset?"

"Upset..." he lifted his head up and looked around at the ponies staring at him. "Upset! My father... built this organization. He took over this building, and made us into something. For you... you. A bastard-born bitch to take control. You... mule." He spat. "This city was built by ponies. When the world was destroyed, ponies built it back up again. We kept it running. Ponies made this organization, ponies made it great, to see your kind trying to take control of it, it makes me sick."

Molly did not answer. Instead she pulled a sawed-off shotgun out from under the table, held it in her fetlock, aimed it across the table, and shot him in the chest. "Really? That's what you have to say?" She fired again. The slug slammed into his head jerking it back in a spray of blood before he slumped back over the table. "Listen up, you rats." She climbed onto the table, kicking away a glass of wine, and looked around expressionless. "I'm an open molly. I'll listen your complaints. Your questions. Your concerns. But, if you ever question me because I'm a mule." She cocked her shotgun. "You know the rest." She walked back to her seat, and the party continued.

"I have deemed this reason, along with the good work she has done for the Baises, is enough for the ponies in her order to not turn against her." The video shut off and Wishing faced us again.

"Thank you, as for your other assignment?"

The cyborg looked at me. "I have deemed it classification Alpha, Designation Star-Mare does not have the appropriate clearance to be privy to the details. I request she is asked to leave, or I inform you another time."

Mr. House nodded. "Just so. Be on your way then, I have things to discuss with Star-Mare." The cyborg nodded and left the room at a measured pace. "So, what did you think?" I blinked. Because that was a vague question. "I bought him off a slaver, gave him the choice to live free or work for me. I saved him, so he worked for me. All of those augmentations you see he took by choice. Now he's my best warrior, and head of the infiltration department of the Hizai. Technically. He is not very proactive, but he follows directions to the letter."

"His cybernetics are so cool!" Serenity said that. If it wasn't obvious. House even seemed to chuckle a bit at that.

"He's... nice. I really like his... uh... legs." I coughed into my hoof.

"Yes, I thought you would. Which reminds me. I had that pegasus friend of yours..." Flare! He was around. I guess he stayed in Dise after he spoke to Mr. House, because he knew it'd be too hard to find me. "Put some magazines in your suite. High level augmentations. I suggest all members of the Hizai get whatever best suits their job. Now tell me, why did this job take you over a week, and why now are the Steel Rangers trying to kill you? Did you at least get it done?" His voice was calm, but he looked furious. "And what happened to your face?"

"High Stakes. He shot me..."

"I knew I shouldn't have trusted him. I take it you killed him?"

I winced and shook my head. "Let me explain though! Do you know of the mountain facility, the one Wallkirk founded?"

"Yes. I had spies in there before the war, but never anypony of a sufficiently high level. My knowledge is sparse at best, and I lost all contact with them when the bombs fell." I think I knew what happened to them. "Why?"

"My pipbuck. It has a password to all of the facility's locked doors. Terminals. And barriers. If you can find the robot level. It'd probably turn them off too." The ghoul's eyes literally sparkled. "He shot me. Sold me to the Steel Rangers. They threw me into the facility. We... managed to escape. I know a way in. I know a way into the section where Caledonia was working on experimental cybernetics." It was one of the four entrances I'd found, and the best suited for Mr. House.

"I'm... impressed. Your pegasus friend had me thinking you'd all but gotten yourself killed." Well, there was that too. "Where is this entrance, not near any Steel Rangers, right?"

"Yeah..." I waved at the computer. "Can you bring up a map?" Mr House seemed annoyed at the request but obliged me. "Here." I pointed at the approximate location judging by the indoor and outdoor map. "It might be hidden. A warning though. It's dangerous. Lots of robots. And weird magic..." He raised an eyebrow. "I'd say have teams go in to scavenge. Another waiting outside. Have them report every five minutes. If they don't, send an evac team to clear them out. Quickly. And lots of Spark pulse weapons."

"There's voices in there too!" Serenity added. "Tha scary kind, tell'em not ta get too scared, an not ta sleep. If they see weird thingies, not ta follow. Okay?"

"Duly noted..." He looked a bit surprised that I'd managed to get all this information. Or was that scepticism. "I'll send a team over there as soon as I can, and you will be kept on call if your password is needed." I nodded. "Now. This is good. What about your actual job?"

"I tried to stop the Crimson Hoof-"

"Who?" he cut me off.

"A northern raider gang. I have previous affiliation with them. They took over the town anyway. Then I went back and made a deal. They agreed. No tariffs or taxes will be levied."

"Maybe I was wrong about you," the ghoul said to me. That was kind of nice, I think. "I had expected you to die, to be honest, but not only did you complete the job, you have given me valuable knowledge and a chance at valuable supplies." That was a compliment. I think. "To be honest, I only brought you in here today to chastise you. I had thought you failed. Instead I think I'll be giving you a raise, and a few days off to recuperate. I'll have a new assignment by the end of the week, until then, rest."

"Thank you." I was being polite so my next assignment would involve fewer ancient secrets and megaspell-powered demi-gods.

"For now, I have things that need to be done; it is good that my kind never sleep or I'd be much less effective. So go, I expect a full written debrief presented to Starscream by the end of the week." Blah, I hated writing more than I hated reading. I nodded though, and went to leave his spacious office. "One more thing." I turned to look back at him. "Tell your pegasus friend to be more discerning as to who he brings into your room. We have a reputation to keep." Oh... kay. The only ponies I figured he would bring would be pegasi, and I guess he didn't want to be associated with them.

As soon as the door closed behind me Serenity jumped off my back, and we hoof bumped. "Nice work, impressin' yer boss! We did real good, didn't we, Momma?" Well, maybe not good. If everything

worked as planned we broke even, and that was good for us.

“Real good.” I hefted up the B.E.L and Subtlety onto my back. “Let’s put this away, then I want to go see Haze.” Serenity gasped and giggled something about me having a crush before merrily leading the way to our room.

In a way, it was really good to be home. When I'd left the BS before, I did not think I was going to be gone for as long as I had, and I found myself missing the city. It was a horrible place to me at times, but things seemed to go right for me more often there than anywhere else. Most importantly though, it was mostly secure. I could rest in Dise, unwind, and let my brain work though everything that had happened to me. To us.

It had been a harrowing experience to be sure, but for some I was really excited to tell Platinum Haze about what had happened. Just to see her again, to talk to her. I'd thought before it was just a silly crush because she was pretty... and it was a silly crush, and she was pretty, but she was more than that. I could only hope she still liked me despite my face. It was foalish of me to dismiss her out of hoof before. Yes I had issues, but I realized that most of those problems could be resolved just by taking it slow. I didn't need a 'true love' but I could really use the comfort of a casual marefriend. Maybe start out with a date or something...

Blah blah blah not a filly-fooler. I'm not even sure why I keep saying that.

Eventually we reached our room. Serenity jumped up, turned the handle, and opened the door.

Inside was Flare, lying on top of very well-endowed stallion on the couch. Scattered around him and across the room were dash inhalers and whiskey bottles. When I walked in, Flare looked up at me, blushed hot red and gulped. “Hired! You're... early...” His eyes scanned the many empty vials of dash. “I can... explain...”

“Go on...” I wasn't even really sure what to say to that. My mind just went into a complete halt at the scene.

“Curly Fries... it's his fault...” Seeing as the prostitute was clearly not Curly, I found that hard to believe. “Really...”

Level Up!

Skill Note: Speech 75, Unarmed 75

((A/N: Another late chapter. I do apologize once again and am trying to do better in the future. But it is here, and I've hit another milestone. So here's to the ten thousand of you that read the prologue. I love you guys. I also love Kkat and the story she created, and my editors theBSDude, Menti, and Mint Julep. Cheers! ))

## *Chapter 23: Time Off*

*“Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up.”*

I kicked Flare off the whore, then I hooked my metal foreleg around the other stallion and lobbed him out the door. Perhaps I threw a bit too forcefully because he hit the opposite wall and slid down it in a daze. After slamming the door so hard I cracked the frame, I spun and focused my rage on the smirking pegasus.

“You Should See The Look On Your Face,” he said in between giggle fits. “Priceless!” He just laughed there on the floor, kicking his legs and flapping his wings. He was high as fuck.

So I kicked him in the gut and turned his laughter into a gasp for breath. “What the fuck Flare?! Dash? Really?” I couldn't give a damn about his stallion-whore friend. He was allowed to fuck whoever he felt like, but going back on Dash? Didn't he give me a big speech in the facility about overcoming addiction? And now this.

He didn't respond right away, so I took a step closer. “Momma don't!” Serenity cried from behind me. “You're hurting him!” Good! He was supposed to be the model I was going to follow. A way to prove to myself that I could kick my addiction by looking at his example.

“Listen To Your Daughter.” Flare scrambled away and flapped into a corner.

“Why Flare? I thought you said you kicked this? You're going to relapse for the sake of a bastard li-”

“Yeah, Fuck You Too, Hired.” He held his stomach where I kicked him. “I've Fought For You, Bled For You, Killed For You. High Stakes Is An Idiot, But You're Not Much Better.” He spoke fast and loud, and I wondered if he could even control the inflection of his voice. “High Stakes, Hired Gun, Serenity, Mr. House, The Enclave, The Steel Rangers, The Reconstruction Center, Simple Heart, Timber, Bridle Hope, Bitter Steel! It's Too Much! Something Had To Give.” He gasped. “Something... I Needed It, I Needed Its Help. It's Too Much. It Was Dash Or I Break Down.”

I wasn't sure how much of what he said was true. It was a lot of stress, but I honestly thought that this was about High Stakes more than anything. It was easier when High Stakes betrayed him, but that message shifted the blame to just about everyone including Flare.

“Buck up! You're a stallion, act like one. You're better than-” He cut me off.

“Hired 'Give Me Your Med-X' Gun Is Telling Me To Quit?” I grit my teeth and took the insult. “Yeah... That Makes Sense. You're A Hyp-”

“SHUT UP BOTH'A YOU!” Somehow Serenity stood between us, though I wasn't sure when she got there. “Flare, ya go take a shower, Silver, we're gunna go see Haze. Both'a ya are gunna be 'part for tha rest of tha day, an tomorrow when ya cooled down ya can talk.” I don't think she was allowed to decide that. “Ah'm serious. It's late, an I don't want ya two bickerin' all night.

“Sure!” Flare grinned, clearly still tweaked out of his little pony mind. “I'll Just Have To Go Apologize To The Mustangs For Damage To Their property An-”

“No whores.” I glared at Flare. “Not in my room.”

He just pouted, “No Fun.” My glare seemed to bring him down. “Oh, Well, Fine Then. Tomorrow With

The Talking. I'm Looking Forward To It! No... Wait, The Opposite Of That!" Or not. The urge to kill him was rising; it was lucky for him that Serenity was there. "Well, Go Now," he said.

Ugh, this was just sucking. With a little bit of annoyance I started to leave until I remembered walking around the city with a B.E.L. might just be a bad idea. Reluctantly I set the weapon near the door and glared over at Flare. "If you touch this. I will kill you. A lot."

"Yeah, Yeah," Flare said. Which really raised my confidence and my spirits.

I spun around, walked out, and slammed the door. Words cannot express how angry I was, but the closest guess I can think of is that it felt like I'd taken another dosage of Rage. I stomped my hoof once and stared at the imprint it made on the floor. It wasn't enough though. I don't know why it upset me so much to see him regress like that, but it really did.

"Momma, c'mon. Haze is waiting." Yeah. That was good at least. Serenity tugged on my leg some and I reluctantly looked up and shook the anger out of my head. I could deal with it later, for now I had to see Haze. To see how I felt. It was important. I started walking down the hall, slowly at first, but steadily picking up speed.

How long had it been since I'd seen the alicorn? It must have been over a week, but I couldn't seem to figure out exactly how many days. Too many, of that I was sure. Hopefully she would even want to see me. I did turn her down, and I wasn't exactly prettier now. She always seemed nice, but she was also annoyingly gorgeous and her standards would have to be above my scarred hide. It was clear that I'd made a mistake by turning her down before, but I could rectify that. We just had to keep it slow. Give us both time to adjust. That makes sense, right? Well it would have to because that was my plan and I was sticking to it.

Of course, when I was deep in thought I wasn't looking where I was going and ran face first into Starscream. Well it would have been face first if I wasn't a head taller than him. "The he- oh Hired." He took a step back and retracted his sharp wings. I must have surprised him. "So you are back, it's not just a rumour. Some of the Hizai stationed here were betting on if you'd survive."

"Of course Momma would!" Serenity said haughtily from beside me. "Nothing could kill her."

"My thoughts exactly, little one." He smiled sweetly at my daughter before turning his head to me. "So I owe you a drink. I am quite a bit richer now."

"Uh... thanks." I really hoped that wasn't him hitting on me. "Maybe another time. My day off. Need to see somepony." Wait. "Quick question first, you hiring? I mean the hotel. Not the Hizai." Pearly still needed a job.

"Yes, I believe so, if you have a friend who wants a job it can be arranged. So long as she doesn't mind serving drinks." There! Something went right. The day was not a total loss. With a nod I continued back on my way. With a sheepish grin he quickly moved out of the way, "I'll have to speak to you later though." He said as I was halfway past him. That was more than a little annoying but I turned to him anyway and raised an eyebrow. "About your pegasus friend."

"What did he do..." My voice was low, and it was my intention to be threatening.

"He has been ordering quite a bit on your name. Drugs, whores, alcohol. From the Mustangs and Galicians mostly, which makes it more expensive. I'll have to take it out of your pay, unfortunately, unless you can convince him to pay." My eye twitched just a little bit. "Are you okay?"

"I'm going. To murder him." I hissed through clenched teeth.

"Well I'm afraid that won't pay your bill."

“It’ll be worth it!” I huffed. The amiable cyborg alicorn just shook his head at my display. Maybe I was just being a little bit childish about the whole affair, but that was pretty much par the course for me.

“Whatever you say.” He smirked and nodded down the hall where the elevator was waiting for me. “Oh!” he said as me and Serenity passed him, “one more thing.”

“What!” Okay, so I was getting more than a little pissed off.

“I still need that report about what happened.” Seriously? “Have fun.” He laughed and trotted off. I wasn’t sure if he was enjoying my discomfort, or actually thought tedious reports were funny. Well the joke would be on him if he expected whatever I wrote to be half way legible.

So I with my bad mood, and Serenity with her fruitless attempt to cheer me up with smiles, entered the elevator. Elevator technology was still kind of strange to me, but whatever. So long as the cable didn’t snap and send us tumbling to the first floor. Though it would have gotten us there quicker, as the elevator was infuriatingly slow. Not to mention quiet.

When we eventually reached the first story I stormed out of the elevator, through the main hall of the BS casino, and out the doors. The sun was just starting to set in the west so I came out of the building to look at the bright orange sky beyond the buildings and walls of Dise. It was sort of beautiful to see, even if I didn’t get a good look with so much in the way. It didn’t do much to put me in a good mood. It reminded me too much of fire.

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We descended into the tunnels below Dise from the secret entrance in the east side slums. No longer did the tunnels remind me of the darkness and whispered promises. The trip through the black hell that was the eastern tunnel was a thing of the past, and while I would always carry the scars from it, it was no longer something that haunted me. Not now that I knew what caused the visions. When the orb was a mystery, dark and powerful, it hurt more, and knowing the truth, or at least part of the truth, helped. That all being said, I doubt you could pay me enough to journey back there. Which was a shame because I had made a promise to journey down there and find it no less.

I didn’t plan on doing that right then, so I kept walking. By then I’d already memorized the path to Platinum Haze’s orphanage. So long as the dim lights above us didn’t fail, and so long as no paths were caved in, I would be able to get there. The tunnels really were amazing, an interlocking web of passages that connected all of Dise. They seemed to spread out infinitely. A thousand different paths, a thousand unexplored corridors. Though the tunnels were populated (because they were safe, and secure, and provided much to scavenge) that was only a small fraction of the entire mass.

So much of the tunnels were unexplored. Maybe because some of the lower levels were framed in dirt, and incomplete, or because large sections lacked power. Who knew what treasures were hidden in these uncharted catacombs, who knew what mysteries lay dormant? Hopefully I never would. The reconstruction centre had filled me with more mysteries, catacombs, and hidden dangers than I ever wanted or needed. It didn’t help that both were built by, or at least paid for and supervised, by Wallkirk. It seemed everything that stallion touched turned to rust, decay, and death. Of course... considered the world all but ended, the same could go for any pony who lived before the war.

It was strange to think that ponies must have built these tunnels. Real, living and breathing ponies two hundred years ago had carved under their city to make a home. Or at least that was what Wallkirk had promised. It was supposed to be a fallout centre, the world’s largest Stable. Instead it became the world’s largest tomb. What would those ponies have thought, the ones who built this place, to know their years of hard work had accomplished nothing. That despite the blood and sweat they had poured into this place, nothing had been preserved except their failure. A vast network of tunnels and caverns,

of would-be homes and schools, and hospitals, an underground city made for the residents of Dise, and all that was left of this promise were ruined halls and lights that barely worked.

It was a depressing thought, but a necessary one. Sometimes it was easy to forget the ponies that came before. Most everypony who lived knew that the old world burned in balefire, but the scope was hard to imagine. How many ponies could have lived in these tunnels. Hundreds? Thousands? Millions? The scale was above and beyond anything I could imagine, and this was just one city in a sparsely populated country. How many cities burned in Equestria itself? How many millions died that day?

Sometimes I wondered if ponykind still existed. Yes we were technically ponies, but as a race we were dead. We were a shambling corpse of a race stumbling around looking for one last thing to do before we kill each other off. Like maggots that eat at the flesh of a corpse we as ponies only existed to feed off the remains of our former glory, to suck the buildings dry, to scavenge the flesh and technology from the bones of the corpse of our culture. And when our meal ran out, when we scavenged the last wire and gun and light, when the flesh was gone and not even bone marrow existed to feed on, we would die off for good, after living a mere two hundred years longer than we should have.

I hated these tunnels.

Whenever I came down, here my mind travelled to a world two hundred years dead and made me think. These thoughts just made my head hurt. It was better to ignore the past, keep moving, and survive. It was the only way. Maybe the world had died, maybe our race had died, but I was still alive, and I was going to *survive*.

For the second time that day, I was so lost in thought I wasn't watching where I was going. I tripped on a fallen and cracked statue as I turned a corner and fell face first into the metal grate that made up the floor.

"Momma!" Serenity ran over to me head and started to shake it. "Are you awake? Were ya sleepwalkin'? You were so quiet I was sure ya were sleepwalkin'!"

"I wasn't." I mumbled blinking up at the dim light above me. The glowing tube blinked for a second and looked like it nearly went out. "I'm... good." I looked around the hallway still tumbled over on my side. On the side of the wall was a simple wooden door with a plaque that had the word 'Wall' written on it. It looked really familiar.

"Well let's get goin' then, 'for ya fall 'sleep fer real." She tugged at me in an attempt to help me it. It might have been effective were she not tiny, and I not massive. "Come. on."

"Wait..." She stopped pulling at me and let me get up myself. "I need to see something." I walked over to the door and studied the plaque. On the golden background the black words 'Wall' was clearly visible, but if I looked closer (I briefly lifted up my eyepatch so my cyber-eye could assist) then the faint outline of letters that had fallen off and faded were still barely visible. 'Wallkirk'. The door said 'Wallkirk'. Looking back at the broken statue that had tripped me, I noticed that, if it had still been standing, it would have been remarkably similar to the statue that adorned the fountain in the centre of Dise.

"What is it Momma?" Serenity asked.

I should have responded, but something struck me about this door. About this place. Ever so carefully I pressed the flat of my metal hoof against the door. Then kicked. The door gave way in a shower of splinters, which made Serenity gasp and run behind me for cover.

"Sorry." I walked through the door. "Have to see something." The room was marginally more preserved than most in the wasteland and much more ornate. The wallpaper would have been fancy if it

weren't stained and peeling, and the desk that took up most of the room would have been a marvellously thing with its golden outline, had the desk not cracked down the middle leaving the right half collapsed, and the left only standing because it was leaning on the right. In order to walk over to the desk I had to carefully step around the countless papers strewn across the floor as if somepony left in a hurry. As I walked I tried to read them, but the words were smudged, and paper stiff and ready to crumble.

Off to the side was a large full length mirror. As I passed it I couldn't help but look. It was a strange picture, seeing me reflected there in the centre of the room. The room was a fancy, if slowly decaying, picture of the old world, and I was most certainly a pony of the one that came after. Scared and broken and walking through ruins in order to find something to feed upon so I could survive one more day. I didn't belong here, the reflection seemed say, but yet there I was treading through the murky waters of the past.

“Momma, what're you doin...?” Right. I had stopped to think. That was getting annoying. I kept getting lost in thought as of late.

“Looking.” I carefully walked around to other side of the broken desk. Besides a single broken lamp, the desk was completely empty (no doubt whatever papers were on it found their way to the floor). Carefully I scanned the desk and noticed a few intact drawers on the side that hadn't completely collapsed. Upon opening them I found the first three to be completely empty, the last one however was different. It was completely empty like the others, but being close to it made my shoulder burn. That could only mean something magical.

I hefted the drawer out of its socket and placed the whole thing on the desk, studying it intently. Serenity got bored of waiting and ran across the room (disturbing the papers I had attempted to avoid) and jumped onto the desk. She poked the drawer a few times before giving me a confused look.

“Magic... I can feel it.” But what kind of magic was the real question. Apart from the fact that something about it was magical, I couldn't figure much else out.

“Huh.” Serenity prodded the drawer and lifted herself up to get a better look inside. “Oh!” she used her magic and a few seconds later I heard a pop as she lifted the bottom of the drawer out in a pink magical field. “False bottom...” She grinned. “And there's a... magical something, look.”

Sure enough, when I looked into the drawer with the bottom removed I saw a thin purple glowing shield covering where the false bottom was before. Underneath it was a small binder of papers, apparently secret like. I knew from past experiences I wasn't going to get through the magical field without a lot of ordinance, or I had the particular magical it was looking for. So instead, I flipped the shelf upside down, slammed my hoof through the bottom of the shelf, and took the papers out that way. Whoever designed this system was not very bright.

The papers were all perfectly preserved in a hard plastic binding. With all the care I could muster with my large clumsy hooves, I set the documents before me. There were four in total, but I noticed on the back of the binder it listed more. He must have taken some with him when he went... wherever it was he went.

As I started to read the first of the documents I realized I already knew what it was about. It was a carefully detailed document about what happened to Simple Heart, how he became what he was. There was also a long section about Baptisia's betrayal, as well as numerous quoted reports about who she could have been working for, and who her know allies were. The final section said it was going to detail her fate, which is why I only skimmed the rest and went straight for that. The problem was it said nothing, but told me to refer to a collaborating report.

Which I did, as said report was right there. Reading through it, I instantly got bored, which was impressive considering it was about spies and subterfuge. Maybe it would have been interesting if the spies were looking for interesting information, but instead they were looking for some book. Apparently it had some cool spells on it or something, and was a huge secret. It must have been important because according to the records he spent a lot of money just to have a single pony read it. Not even steal, just read once. Once I got to the section about Baptisia I found it referred me to yet another document.

“Momma... are you okay? Ya starin’ at that thing and we need’a go.” Yeah. I closed the reports and shoved them into my saddle bags. I could always read the rest later.

“I’m fine. Let’s go.” After pushing away from the desk I got up and walked back towards the door. This time I didn't care if I disrupted the mess of paper, and I didn't bother to look at the mirror for some more philosophical conundrum. Fuck philosophy; it was just another remnant of the past trying to scratch its way back to the surface, and all it did was make you realize how much everything sucked. I stopped at the door and took a look back into the room. There was... something I was missing. I wasn't sure what, but there was something.

“What was all that, Momma?” Serenity asked as we continued down the hall.

“Nothing important to us.” the documents felt heavy in my bags. “Just old world shit. House might want it.” Like everything else in the tunnels, it was just the old world coming back to haunt the new.

The tunnels were as still as silent as they everywhere, and there was nothing to listen to but our steady breathing and hoof steps. Maybe it wasn't so bad the ponies down here died, maybe it was a mercy. Ponies were liable to go insane down here. Of course, the same could be said for stables. Maybe I was just trying to reassure myself that what happened wasn't as monstrous as it had seemed.

We walked down a set of stairs to where Platinum Haze lived, and it was then I started to hear voices. Angry voices. Without so much as a second thought I started to run. After turning a corner I saw a disturbing scene.

Platinum Haze (when I saw her at first, I almost missed everything else going on. She was just too beautiful) was standing in a defensive position with a opaque blue bubble shield encompassing her. The more pressing issue was the fifteen or so gun toting ponies surrounding her yelling demand. The leader was a short white unicorn with a long blond mane, and a rising sun for a cutie-mark. She started to hush the crowd with a wave of her hoof.

“Serenity. Take cover.” The little filly frowned and nodded before scurrying back behind the corner we turned. Just as I started to get Subtlety ready my eyes met Platinum Haze's. To my surprise she just shook her head. She was in danger though. Why wouldn't she want help. I headed her wishes, but my stomach twisted in anxiety.

“You.” The mare challenged the alicorn with a look. “Have taken foals that belong to Celestia's Vision. I command you to return them to where they belong.” I had remembered Haze spoke of her partner travelling to where the remnants of Celestia's Vision after Karkhoof Zebra counter attack were, and bringing back the foals. It should have been expected that move wouldn't be without consequence.

“We Apologize!” Her voice seemed to boom across the room, and her eyes were glowing. “But We Cannot! The Foals We Have Taken Were Parent-less And Without Guidance! If Their Parents Are Still Alive We Will Give The Foals Up To Them, If Their Relation Can Be Proven! In Addition, We Have Asked Each And Every Foal If They Wished To Stay With Us Or Return, And All Agreed To Stay! We Will Ask Again, But Will Not Return Any Foal Who Does Not Wish To Go!”

“No, you will give them up.” The mare floated up her pistol threateningly. “I will not allow them to be

with an abomination such as you.”

“We Are Sorry You Feel That Way In Regards To Us, But We Cannot Abide By Your Request!” Her voice echoed one more and the sounds of cocking guns was the reply. “Please!” Her booming voice faded turning to normal, “Do not do this, we beg of you. You are making a mistake...”

“No. You are.” A single bullet slammed into the shield.

The rest of the ponies didn't fire. Platinum Haze's horn adopted a second and third layer of glowing energy and suddenly a light blue field wrapped over all fifteen ponies weapons. There was a brief tug of war with each weapon simultaneously but the blue won over and Haze pulled every weapon away, turned them around, and pointed them at her attackers. There was a collective gulp as the group looked shock. The white pony in particular looked like she was sweating bullets as she looked down the barrel of her own pistol.

Haze's voice returned to its booming tone. “We Warned You! But You Did Not Heed!” Every single weapon in the room cocked, and I was fairly sure one of the ponies wet themselves in fear. “You Will Regret This Decision...”

All at once Haze detached the ammo feed from every weapon, and removed every chambered bullet. There was a collective sigh of relief. It turned to more of annoyed groan though when haze bent the barrels of all the weapons in such an impressive feat of magic is made my shoulder burn so hot I almost thought it was on fire.

“We will not kill you, it is not our way.” The broken weapons clattered to the ground. “But neither shall we allow you to have the foals, if they do not wish it. Leave this place at once, you have nothing more to do here.”

“W-what I...” The mare with the rising sun on her flank gulped. The ponies around her seemed a lot less confident now that they realized they didn't have the upper hand.

“Ahem!” I said loud. Everypony looked down the hall towards me. “She might not kill you. I won't make the same promise.” The white mare gave me a strange look I couldn't decipher and waved the ponies away. One by one Celestia's Vision started to leave the area, but it was not until the last one turned the corner I walked over to Platinum Haze.

I'll admit I was really nervous to see her again. A lot had happened and I was worried she wouldn't like me anymore. After the way I rejected her, and got all cut up, I did really deserve rejection, but I didn't want it. We could make this work, I was sure of it. If we took it slow, did things right. I really wanted it to work. “Platinum Haze, I-”

She cut me off, and I waited for the worst.

“Silver! Your face! Are you okay?!” Her voice was high and worried. She was just held at gunpoint by fifteen ponies, and she asked me if I was okay. That was the same Platinum Haze alright.

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Platinum Haze quickly casted an invisibility spell over us (I didn't have time to explain how that hurt) and hurried us towards a... wall. Only it wasn't an actual wall given she was able to walk right through it, and so were we. Haze explained that the school was becoming known, and it was a priority to keep its whereabouts hidden at all costs. Once inside Haze and I deposited Serenity with the other foals, at Serenity's request. Apparently she made a friend before, and was excited to talk to them again. I was instantly suspicious.

The first thing I noticed once I got a look at the orphanage was how much better it looked than before. The walls had been repainted (white and pink) and most of the rubble had been moved. The lights

seemed to be completely new, and a lot more magical than before. Perhaps most importantly I noticed more than one non-foal walking around the orphanage tending to tasks.

“Some have heard of us and expressed interest. We took great precaution to interview them, and we personally performed a memory spell on them to hear their true intentions.” Haze explained after nodding to one such mare. It was hard to pay attention while I stared at her majestically flowing mane, but I got the gist of it. “Diamond Sky was apprehensive about the idea, but we won her over. It has become much easier to handle with extra hooves.”

After smiling and nodding my understanding, Haze led me down to her room. It too had been refurbished and looked a lot more like an actual room rather than a dirty mattress on the floor. Haze begged me to rest on her new bed (complete with bed frame) and rushed off to speak with Diamond Sky. It didn't give me much time to think though, as she came back just as quick as she left.

Upon her return she laid down beside the bed I was on (we were roughly at eye level) and enquired as to what had happened. So I told her. It was an obscenely long story, and I may have skipped over a few parts like the visions, but it got the job done.

“And... your face...” she asked timidly looking at the web of scars that marked half my face. “It looks...” ugly. Disgusting. “Like it hurts. Are you okay, we worry.”

“Shotgun...” I rubbed the scars. They still hurt sometimes, or maybe it was my mind playing tricks on me. “Nearly died. But apparently I was 'useful.’” I chuckled bitterly. “High Stakes, like I said before. I never should have trusted him...” Flare shouldn't have either, but that ship had sailed. Now I just needed to figure out how to get Flare out of his funk, and then maybe find High Stakes and murder him.

Before I could say anything more I felt Platinum Haze wrap her hooves around my neck. “We were so worried about you. We are aware it is silly as we have not known you long... but we have not been apart from Unity long, and time is relative.” That made sense, I think, at least from what I learned about it. “We...” she pulled away, “we apologize. We are aware of your feeling, you made them clear before we shouldn't...”

“You'd still want me even though I look like something a rad-scorpion dragged home for dinner?” I gave her a slight smirk and tried my best to portray Flare like levels of humour. It makes the conversation less serious, and thus easier.

“Your good looks were never what we were attracted to, and we do not think the scars detract from your looks in any fashion.” She said simply. “We found you... fascinating. You did not treat us as anything but another pony. Even those we have hired to work here act as if we should be worshipped and feared, yet you did not. We found this comforting, and when we saw your story we were able to look past your brutish nature.” Ouch, that hurt. “We cannot fully explain our feelings, but we say this to explain that looks are not, and have never been our primary concern.”

That made sense, I think. It seemed silly in retrospect I ever thought my good looks were why she was attracted to me. Even unscathed I had been passable at best.

“B-but, we. We are aware you did not wish to pursue a relationship, we apologize.”

“Haze do-” I tried to wave a hoof to calm her down but she kept talking.

“W-we understand, really. W-we missed you thought, and were worried. You were gone for so long and we feared...” Tears seemed to water in her cat-like eyes.

“Haze, really lis-” She cut me off again, her voice starting to waver even more.

“A-and w-we understand. Really. We are simply silly for getting attached. We are sorry, we will leave

you alone and-" Oh for Celestia's sake.

I leaned over and pressed my lips to hers. It was not a long kiss, or even a very good one, but it got my point across well enough. When I pulled back I saw instead of nearly crying she was blushing a hot red. It was almost impossibly adorable.

"Can I talk now?" She nodded silently. "Thank you. Haze." I lifted her chin up with a hoof, because I really was a sap. "I was wrong. Before, I shouldn't have... I was right. I was afraid we were going to go too fast, and that would have been... wrong. Not healthy. I didn't even think of taking things slow. One step at a time. Deal with issues as they come, and tread carefully." That sounded stupid, and I found myself blushing. I hated blushing, yet every time. "I... I like you. I'd like to get to know you better."

"W-we would like to as well." She seemed unsure as she looked to the ground, but quickly brought her eyes back in line with mine. "We would like it a lot."

"I only have one condition." She looked at me quietly, which I could only guess was giving me the option to answer. "We're never allowed to be this sappy again. Somepony could see. I have a reputation to uphold." At first she gave me a bemused look, and I worried that my teasing had gone over her head, but it slowly turned into a small grin, and finally into a high pitched giggle.

"We apologize." She stood up to bow. "We did not mean to jeopardize your reputation."

"It's fine." I nodded impassively. "The walls won't tell. But next time." It was simply too silly not to smile.

"Do you mind if I stay the night...?" Watch how I make a fool of myself by not thinking before I speak. "I-I mean not *stay*, just sleep. Not, with you, that is. It's Just. Flare, and." I did my best to stem the rising tide of my blush. After a few deep breaths I looked back at Haze who had a bemused smirk. "Flare and I got into a... fight. It's a long story. Just need to cool off..." and he needed to come off his high. "So I need a place..."

"It is fine Silver, we do not mind. Tonight is not a night we sleep." I'm not entirely sure that made sense.

"I thought you didn't require sleep? That's what you said. Before." The day of travelling had left me pretty tired, and the fight with Flare did not help matters either, so it was possible I was remembering things wrong.

"We... did state that, but in error. In Unity sleep was not required, but in this forms it seems as though it is. Though, we have determined it is not as important, and we can go longer without." She blushed a little. "When we found this information it was on accident. We vanished while looking for more orphans, and Diamond Sky was ragged with worry. It turned out I was standing outside the door, only invisible and asleep... it is a lucky thing that we snore." It was a task not to laugh at how silly that story was. "If you were here we might have been found sooner."

"Yeah." I said trying my best to get comfortable on the bed. "I'm special like that."

There was a strange silence, and when Haze did not respond right away I looked over to her. Her yellow eyes were closed and she looked like she was contemplating something, or trying to remember. Eventually she opened them and looked gravely. "We... are not certain you are." Was that suppose to be an insult? "One night, we were up top looking for orphans to rescue when we passed this mare. Please understand that when we go up we use multiple spells that keep us completely silent and invisible, and we did not pass within twenty feet of this mare, but I swear. She turned and looked at me. Right in the eyes. She was an earth pony too, there was no way she could have seen us, yet... it was only when we flew away that she went on her way. It was unsettling."

Really? Another pony with that same strange power? It seemed a bit circumstantial, but there wasn't really another way she could have seen Haze if her spell was as good as she said. Maybe there was an actual reason for my powers. "What did she look like?" If I could find her, and ask, maybe I'd be able to figure it out. I've been able to sense magic for so long it had just become part of who I was, but with this information something in the back of my head nagged at me to find out its cause.

"We are sorry... we cannot recall. It was dark." She looked abashed. "We just thought the information was relevant." It was at that.

My mind circled backwards trying to remember when the ability first came to me. As an earth pony, most things magical had been far beyond my grasp or understanding, and unless I was sorely mistaken I didn't start being able to sense magic until Bridle Hope. A thought struck me, and I slowly lifted up my metal leg. I only had that ability since I got my leg, maybe the two were connected somehow.

"Did she... have any cybernetics?"

The alicorn looked at me and slowly panned down to the my leg. Slowly she shook her head, "None that we could see, but we did not get a good look. We apologize."

If it wasn't the cybernetics what else could it be. Maybe something from stable forty two... oh! The star metal bullet! Of course. Me getting shot in the leg was what led to my new leg, and maybe that was it. Everypony I talked to claimed that nopony else had survived direct contact, and according to Sky Fall I was still minutely infected (and possibly dying, but I ignored that part). It was possible that some sort of... thing in the poison in substance gave me the ability. I wasn't a magical pony, so I couldn't know for sure.

"Do you know what Star Metal is?"

Platinum Haze's eyes went wide and she slowly, and perhaps a bit fearfully nodded. "We are aware... it is most dangerous. What is the nature of the enquiry?"

"Do you know... of anypony that has survived it?"

"We..." she looked away almost as if she was trying to say something, and then shook her head. "Our knowledge is limited. From everything we have seen we cannot give you an accurate answer. We apologize." That was a strange way to word 'no', but it was good enough for me. Maybe I would hit up that pegasus bastard who Flare worked for, and see if he knew anything more substantial. "Are you okay?" She asked.

"Huh, yeah." I smiled at her. "Sorry. Just thinking. Too much. I'm a dumb pony who forgets I'm dumb."

"We do not think you are dumb..." With a sigh she slowly stood up and looked back towards the door.

"We hate to do this, but Diamond Sky will require our assistance shortly."

"It's fine Haze... it's good to see you again. I'm glad we got this.. worked out. Ish." She smiled and I saw a hint of a blush on her cheeks. "Can you get tomorrow night off?"

"Uh... perhaps. For what, may we enquire?" The tall equine seemed a bit nervous at my question, if the way she kicked at the floor was any indication.

"Would you go on a date with me? The Alehouse has restaurants. That's what you do on dates. Right?"

She nodded slowly. "W-we would love to! But... if we go out in public, we fear we will be subject to an attack."

"I have an idea. About how to hide your appearance." For once I had an idea, and I'm pretty sure it was awesome. "How do you feel about dresses? I'll hire the Finishers to make one. They can be 'hush hush.' With that you'll just look like a unicorn."

“A rather large one; we will stand out.” Admittedly that was true, but who would ask a giant unicorn why she was a giant unicorn?

“If anything happens turn invisible and we'll escape. It's worth a shot right? Just once. Please.” This time I took a page from Serenity's book, and I gave her a pouty look. It seemed to be enough to make her smile.

“Oh fine, we cannot deny you of anything.” She giggled before leaning down to kiss me. It was just long to leave me satisfied and have me begging for more. Not to mention how shocking it was that she took the initiative. When she pulled away her blush had grown twice as red, and was working its way up her ears.

“Uh...” my blush was not much better. “Tomorrow. Ask. I'll arrange things. I missed you...”

“You said that.” She had a smile on that seemed to light up the room, and I loathed to see it go away when she left the room. Unlike before she managed this time not to get her flowing mane stuck in the door when she closed it. Instead it was her tail. With a cute squeak, a blush, and apology, she managed to leave the room without anymore damage.

I flopped back in the bed and started giggling. There was no reason to giggle (in fact I prefer to chuckle, chortle or nicker if I had the choice) but I couldn't stop myself. Something came over me after that very successful conversation. I just wanted to lie there and giggling like a fool until the date. Everything just felt so great, and I was... happy. It wouldn't last, but I wanted to savour it. So I kept giggling. Through the door, I could have sworn I heard Haze doing the same.

Eventually the giggling had to fade, and the worries came. My plan for the date was not really as sound as I'd pretended, but I had to go through with it. It was the perfect way to take it slow, and it'd take my mind off everything trying to kill me. Still, if I could get the dresses, and the plans, if everything worked just right then maybe. Maybe it'd be something special. I'm not sure what 'something special' was, but it seemed like the thing to aim for.

Sleep wouldn't come though. My thoughts were too persuasive, so I dug out those documents and hoped they'd put me to sleep. I remembered the last one I read told me to reference a particular document, so I picked out the one it suggested.

This one, strangely enough, talked about stealing some sort of technology from Stable-Tec. Apparently they were working on some high-tech computer, and Wallkirk wanted it for whatever reason. Unfortunately a lot of this document seemed to be missing. Entire sections just didn't exist. Infuriatingly, one of those was the section on Baptisia. I guess I would never know what had happened to her.

Idly I lifted up the fourth report and shifted through it. The final one seemed to be less... cloak and daggers. It was entirely about his contract with the Caledonian government to attempt to build the tunnels under Dise. Apparently they thought he was the best choice as he had previously bought an unfinished stable (it did not say which) which gave him and his company the means to study it. Which was strange as the tunnels were not anything like the Stables I'd seen. Which made sense when I got to the last page where is stated:

*“Upon further inspection it is clear that the tunnels may not be able to keep out the expected levels of radiation from a megaspell strike. If the reports are correct it would be prudent to rethink the entire structure they are built with. As it stands right now only the deepest level would be liveable, and even that seems to be up in the air. Because of this I have sent a formal request to redesign the tunnels. I am aware that construction has already began but at a modest fee, they could be restructured to withstand the projected radiation level. I have attached an official request along with how much the project will*

*cost. Please consider it. It could save lives.”*

Folded inside the document was a five page letter that was undoubtedly the project proposal. On the back page was a red stamp stating 'request denied' with Wallkirk's signature beside it.

I dropped the document and just stared at it. That killed my good mood at frightening speed.

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I dreamed of the tunnels during their final hours. I saw ponies running down for safety. They were huddled together at explosions rang out, and lights flickered. Then one by one they started to choke on an unseen poison, and one by one they died thinking they were saved.

Opening my eyes nearly made me jump out of my coat though, as standing above me was an alicorn. For a second I had thought it was Platinum Haze (this alicorn and Haze shared the same slit cat like yellow eyes), but this pony was purple, not dark blue. “W-who...” then I saw the alicorn's mane. It was like a black field with a thousand stars sparkling in its wavering folds. “Diamond Sky?”

“You are correct. Are you awake? I will wait until you are.” That would have been a better ultimatum if she was not standing directly above me. “I will wait, but if you could hasten your pace I would appreciate it. I have much to accomplish today.”

“I...” I said as I slowly pulled the blankets off me and rolled off the bed forcing Diamond to take a few steps back. “You said I. Not we.”

“You have amazing powers of perception.” The alicorn remarked dryly. When I tried to explain what I meant, she quickly cut me off. “Yes, Sister Haze does speak in plurals as we did in Unity. As much as I love my sister, you must understand she is troubled.” Huh, is that why she was here? “When Unity broke, it did not break evenly. Thousands of souls and minds clamoured together around and through mother, and when mother died the minds and souls stayed in the body they were in, unable to move. Some of my sisters have many inside them. Not many wholes, but many pieces of which they must focus to make them whole, to make them a singular again. Sister Haze... is different. When Unity broke it was hard on her, and I took it upon myself to help her, to help her grow despite the challenges. That brings me to why I am here today.” The door slammed shut behind her and locked.

“Uh...” My eyes darted over to Subtlety which was lying beside the bed. “What about.” At those words she moved closer and leaned far too close to me, and flared her wings out.

“I want to make something clear.” The light in the room started to dim, except for her eyes which started to glow. When she spoke her voice seemed lower, and focused at me. “If you hurt her. If you abuse her. If you take advantage of her. I will kill you. Then I will hide your body where none shall find it. Sister Haze may refuse to kill, but I do not hold to that oath. I make exceptions. If you dare do anything to hurt her mind body or soul, you will be an exception. Am I making myself *perfectly clear*?”

This was not the introduction I'd been hoping for. I had heard a little of Haze's friend, and Haze had always seemed to be fond of her... I could see why. It was good Haze had a friend to defend her, and I had no intention of ever hurting Haze, so her threat didn't mean much.

“Perfectly.” Despite knowing I was safe, my throat was still dry making my gulp. “Really. I like Haze. I would never...”

The alicorn stared at me for a good long while, and I held her gaze. “Okay.” She stood back up to her full impressive height, which was taller than even Platinum Haze unless I was mistaken. “I have warned you, I can only pray you are not a liar... you have known Haze at least somewhat to make her care for you. You must understand she is very... she does not like taking charge. The right pony could

abuse her, and if that were to happen..." her eyes hardened. "I promised to protect her, and protect I will."

"Are you like her mother?" As soon as I said that I knew I had misspoke. The alicorn's eyes flashed against and I shuddered.

"We are her sister. Our mother is dead, and we-"

"Sorry!" I cut her off. "I didn't mean... you are like her older sister?"

Her anger seemed to have faded at those words and she nodded. "I find this simile appropriate. If it helps you to think about the situation, that is. So long as you understand." I nodded my understanding. "Good. What, exactly, is your intention with Sister Haze?"

"I... uh." I scratched my two back legs together. They itched something fierce, and I hadn't had my morning medicine. I was in no way in a good place for this discussion, but I doubted stopping it to get high would really endear Sky to me. "I have no intention. I like her. She likes me. We go on a few dates. See where it goes. I'd like a marefriend... I guess. And I like to see Haze happy."

"Okay. I will allow this. Remember my warning." She said very sternly and I heard unlocking behind me.

"What would have happened... if you didn't allow it?" I was good at stupid question.

"I would have stopped your heart, and teleport you into the darkest corner of the tunnels." Even though she wasn't hurting me then, it still felt like my heart was seizing up at the words. Thank Celestia I didn't say anything stupid. "Have a good day." With a brilliant purple flash (that reminded me of the Batmare) the alicorn vanished from the room.

As soon as she left I hurriedly threw Subtlety onto my back to feel safe again, and quickly took out a Med-X. With the delicious drug flowing through my veins I felt my rapidly beating heart start to slow, and normalize. It did remind me I had to speak with Flare that day, but with Med-X in my system I was sure I could handle it. With Med-X I could handle anything.

As soon as I left the room I was hit with a high pitched squeal and impact to my side. "Momma!" She was hanging off Subtlety and kicking hind legs uselessly to try and propel her on properly. "Haze said'ta wake ya up as looooud as I could but ya're already awake. Haze gave me candy too, I like candy, you should give me more. It's really good, it's called chocolate. I like it. It tastes like the best thing ever, and I was gunna use it to wake you up, but I eated it instead. Sorry. Scootaborg ate some too, she likes it more than me, but she wasn't allowed to have much." There was a reason I never gave Serenity much candy.

"Oh really." I remarked in a flat tone as I helped her onto my back. "Why?"

"Cause too much is bad for lil' ponies. Luckily I'm a big pony and allowed to have as much as I want, that's what Haze said." She stood on my back, and decided it's be a good idea to kick my back. "You need somethin' for me to sit on. Oh! How about a saddle, that'd be awesome." Awesome was not the word I would have used. "Guess what, momma?"

"You're actually an alien sent from outta space?" It was as good a guess as any.

"No Momma, you're silly." I couldn't argue that logic. "The guessing is that I made a friend. He's real nice, you'd like'em." A friend. A colt friend. Suddenly Diamond Sky's rant to me felt a lot more justified. "And Haze told me ya two are going on a date! Is this true! That's so cute, can I come?"

"Serenity... no."

"Drat, I was gunna embarrass you with embarrassing stories." As if she knew any. "Or wear the

tablecloth as a cape and run around. That's cute right? Either way, it'd be fun." I was starting to think this was just a ploy to convince me to make Serenity stay at the orphanage for the trip. If that was the case, it was working wonderfully.

"Let's go..." she had clearly won that round, so I dropped the topic and started walking towards where I'd assumed Haze was. Well, not assume. I felt magic, and went towards it. When has that ever went wrong?

In this case it didn't go wrong, for as soon as I reached the end of the hall Platinum Haze trotted out of it. For some reason she had a small yellow colt hanging off her mane. "Hey! Who're you? You're ugly. And you smell. What's your name? Can we be friends? Are you going to kiss Auntie Haze? You look like you are. Who's your friend? Why are you looking at me like that? Do you have any candy?"

With the straightest face I could muster, I replied, "Hired Gun. Sorry. Sorry. Hired Gun. No. Yes. Because I am. Serenity. Because. No." The colt just stared at me with his jaw hanging open as I leaned to kiss Haze's nose. "Good morning."

"Good morning Silver." Haze said as another toddler suddenly appeared peaking around Haze's horn. "Since we have tonight off, Diamond told us to watch the pre-school foals. We are unsure why Diamond always makes us watch them, we think they are simply wonderful.."

"Aunty Haze finks we're wonderfall." The tiny filly that was clinging to Platinum's horn said. "I fink I'm wonderfall. Raygun isn't wonderfall. He's mean. An'a bully." As if challenged by those words a third foal, a colt, jumped onto Haze's head and started to wrestle the filly. A few seconds later and they were tumbling down Haze's neck.

"So Diamond makes you take care of the young foals. Can't imagine why." There were shouts and screams from Haze's back.

With a sigh that was nearly exasperated Haze's horn lit up, and she flared her wings out. Without looking back she pulled the two wrestling foals away from each other and placed them one on each wing. "You two behave." She said sharply. "Or no dessert." The two pouting foals mumbled something that sounded like 'yes Aunty Haze' and there was order once more. "They can be a hoofful, but we simply *adore* children."

"Aunty Haze doesn't have her cutie-mark yet." The colt hanging from her mane said. "Most big ponies do but she doesn't. I don't either. We're gunna help her get her cutie-mark. An' then she'll help us. It'll be like'a team... thing. A group! We'll have'ta think of a name."

"Sorry, Silver, but we must be going. The children need their breakfast, or they will get upset. We will see you tonight?"

"Yes. Meet me in my apartment after you're off. I'll bring a Finisher over." I said as I moved to the side to let her through. "Don't worry about caps."

It was a tight squeeze as she passed because her wings were splayed out, and it didn't help when she stopped mid stride to say to me, "Oh, and your pegasus friend is waiting outside. Diamond Sky said he was not allowed in." Lovely, I was hoping to postpone our heart to heart as long as possible. "We will see you later."

"Oh! We get to see Uncle Flare sooner. Good, ya two need'a hug and make up." Serenity said from beside me prompting me to give her a questioning look. "What, they call Haze 'aunty' Haze, an I've known Flare longer than they've know Haze. It only makes sense." That made too much sense in my brain for me to try to argue.

"Uncle Flare it is." If he didn't apologize and shape up he'd be 'dead Uncle Flare'. Which was, from my

understanding, a much worse title. "Lets find him."

After getting lost a few times in the orphanage hallways (and interrupting another math class), I eventually found the door by following my magic-sense. I'd forgotten about the illusion that made it look like a wall. Upon exiting I was greeted to the sight of the sorry excuse for a pegasus sleeping on the dirty grates that made up the floor.

So I kicked him. It was a light kick, but it was also with my metal hoof so he grunted and opened his eyes. "The fuck... Oh..." his eyes were pink, as they always were, but no longer bloodshot. "Hired." He slowly got to his feet blushing a little bit. "Lets walk and talk. Being underground rustles my feathers."

"Yeah." I grunted and started down the hallway. As I did Serenity jumped onto my back, because who likes walking?

"Listen... Hired. Shit, I'm sorry." He kept his eyes downcast. "It just got too much to handle, and I broke. Taunting you was probably not the best move. Or buying stuff on your credit." he smirked. "But what stuff I bought, you should have seen this one stallion he had a--"

"Fuck off Flare." I cut him off. "I'm tired of your mouth."

This seemed to spark something in the pegasus said as he instantly replied. "Maybe if you weren't such a bitch, this would be easier. Yeah I fucked up, but check yourself before you start throwing me around."

"What! You go and bitch and moan about how your fuckbuddy was an ass, and I'm the bitch." My own words made me stop in my tracks. After going over what I had just said, I realized something... "Am I a bitch? Serenity?"

"Uh..." the filly on my back gulped, which answered my question. "Maybe?" She said tentatively. "it's not the word I'd use but it ain't 'xactly non-correct neither."

I didn't mean to be a bitch, it just came naturally to me. It wasn't like I had a lot of friends. For the longest time Wildfire was my only friend. Sure I had acquaintances, but they didn't really count. So, I guess I wasn't really in the right mindset to deal with Flare. When we were good, it was fine. He'd make jokes, I'd threaten him, but I wasn't sure what to say when he was upset about something, and clearly I was handling it wrong. Apparently ponies don't like it when I diminish their problems.

"Ugh." I said eventually. "Listen." Flare had been silent since my last so to make sure he was listening I stopped and put a hoof on his back. "I'm sorry. I'm a bitch. Totally."

"Yeah you are." He responded perhaps a bit too quickly. "I've always done this. I get attached too quickly. Just like last time..." He started walking again after I took my hoof off so I followed.

"Last time?" I guess it was story time.

"Yeah..." he looked around the tunnel and shuddered. "I mentioned it before. Back in the tunnels, well I called him a mare then, but there's no point to continue that lie." Oh, yeah. I'd completely forgot about that. "It was a long time ago now, but I found a cute little mercenary buck. He wasn't what you'd call a talker, but it was cute to get him to blush." Flare gave a small smile at the thought. "He took a job to clear out some rad-scorpions in these tunnels maybe a month after we met. He never came back..." His voice turned grim really quickly. "Broke my heart, and I got all emotional. By then the jig was up."

"Jig?" Now I was confused. "Why were you dancing?"

"Momma, ah think he means some sorta secret or somethin."

"Uh..." Flare seemed to hesitate. "You know. The whole, liking Stallions things? The Remnants don't take too kindly to that sort of thing." For the life of me, I couldn't imagine why they'd even care.

“Reproduction.” Flare explained. “There are not many surface pegasi... or there were not. Having foals is pretty much required.” Oh... that made sense, but it didn't piss me off any less. “After that there was a huge deal about finding me a marefriend, and that was ever so much fun. So there, another sob story courtesy of yours truly.”

I was starting to wonder if any of us didn't have some sort of attachment issues.

“I see...” I looked down the hall. The exit was coming close. “Listen. So long as you try to quit... and don't waste my money. I'll try to help you, I guess. Somehow. How?”

“Beats me, I'll get over it in time.” Flare flapped his wings a few times so he could hover in front of my while flying backwards. “Which reminds me. I spoke with the Watchers. Booked a detox. You might want to come. For, you know, support.” he winked at me. At least he was somewhat discrete, I guess it was the most I could hope for.

“When... ?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I'll be there.” We stopped at the stairs that led to the secret exit out of the tunnels. All the real entrances inside Dise were owned by gangs, and heavily guarded to stop immigrants, but nopony knew of this one. Yet, anyway. It was good to have some way in and out of the tunnels without a gang knowing my movements. I was sure House had a tunnel entrance, but I was loath to let him know every time I went under.

“Hey Hired.” Flare landed in front of me. “We cool?”

I chewed my lower lip and looked him over. He seemed weaker lately, more tired. The trip through the facility took its toll on him just as it had me, and leaving a loved one was never easy at the best of time. I really had been too hard on him, hadn't I? Sure Stakes was an ass, but Flare had liked him, and my feelings on the matter didn't really change how Flare felt. Mind you he shouldn't have broken and started back on Dash, but if I cut somepony off for having a mental breakdown I'd not only be an idiot, but a huge hypocrite.

“Yeah. Sorry about... being a bitch.”

Flare laughed, “I expect it from you,” and flew up the stairwell. I'm a bitch, he's an ass, and that's the way it should be.

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We made our way from the Dise slums, up north past the main gate into Parasite Mound. We made a brief stop at The Finishers HQ. Nopony I knew was working the front desk, but I still requested a dressmaker at my apartment later for a rush job, and to bring a lot of fabric and the largest dresses they owned. It was not cheap, but with my pay cheque, the money Flare owed me, and the things we scavenged from the facility I would easily have enough.

With that out of the way I made my way to the 'Vinnie May And Franny Mac Death Clock Hotel And Casino' (which was where I directed Pearly to stay) to tell her the good news. Doing all these errands actually made me feel accomplished. It was a nice change of pace from fighting for my life, or travelling.

The hotel was as dim and dark as ever, and we were greeted by a hooker upon entering. In the lobby a stage was set up where a ghoulish pegasus was badly singing a song about how much balefire hurt. At that sight I quickly made my way to the backroom where the signs stated the casino was both hoping that Pearly was there and that it was sound proof. Ghouls just couldn't sing. When the ghoulish saw me scurrying away I could have sworn he stopped his song to call me a racist.

The casino was cramped, grimly, and sparsely populated. Only three one-hoofed bandits were in use, one roulette wheel, one poker table, and two blackjack. It was easy enough to confirm my guess as Pearly was sitting by one of the blackjack tables smiling smugly behind her two cards. To my surprise, I actually recognized two of the other ponies at her table.

One was a tall dark grey mare with a spiky crimson mane, and a bloody dagger tattoo on her flank, and beside her was a small lighter grey filly with a tied back purple mane. “Well look what the fucking cat drug in: a cunt.” The ex-raider laughed. “Get the fuck over here Hired, Pearly's been waitin' and I've been helping. With you here, I can go fuck off so my filly will stop eating all my caps.”

“Nu uh, mommy. You're just bad at counting. I'm a super awesome counter, and guesser. You'd do better if I could teach ya, but ya never let me.” The filly replied haughtily as the dealer shoved some chips towards the filly.

“Pinprick.” The ex-raider smirked as I walked up, “Spitshine.” I nodded greetings to the both of them. “Hey Pearly.” The focused mare just adjusted her hat and stared harder at her cards. I gave a soft laugh and looked at the dealer, “Deal me in?” The dealer took my caps, and gave me some chips in return.

“A chance to steal Hired's money without her kicking me? I'm in.” Flare sat down two and got his chips.

“Momma can I-”

“No Serenity.”

“But that filly gets t-”

“No Serenity.”

“I get to because I'm super awesome.” Spitshine explained. “Look! It's my cutie-mark, init awesome?” True enough on her flank was a picture of a roulette wheel. Not quite blackjack, but the theme of being good at guessing odds came through. “What's your cutie-mark?”

My fillies eyes went downcast and she took a seat beside me. “Doesn't matter...” she mumbled. “Didn't want to play anyway.” I mentally made a note to ask Serenity what was up with her reaction and why she didn't tell Spit she was a blankflank. It would have to wait until private though.

Finally Pearly looked up from her cards, “Hired? Oh hey!”

“The bitch awakens, whoop-de-fucking-do.” Pinprick remarked as the dealer took the cards, and started shuffling.

“Hey Pearly.” I smirked. “You're focused at this game.” At that note the dealer looked hard at us, reminding us to actually, you know, play. I put in a minimum bet, ten caps worth.

“Yeah... trying to figure how that runt keeps winning.” Pearly gave Spitshine a hard and playful gaze as the dealer floated over two cards each. Since most ponies playing the game weren't unicorns, the dealer handled all the cards on the table.

With a sigh I looked at my cards. A two and a jack. “She's got natural talent.” I suggested. Maybe it was right, because the filly was staring hard at her cards. “Hit me.” I waved at the dealer and sure enough I got hit with a ten of spades. “Lovely.” The dealer stopped at nineteen, and everyone else at the table either busted, or was lower. Except for Spitshine, whose first two cards were a ten and ace.

“Natural talent!” Spitshine giggled as I gaped. “I has it!”

“See what I mean, Hon?” Pearly smirked. “Not even fair.” She tapped her hooves on the table as the dealer took the cards in and started to shuffle again. “So did you find a way for me to get into tha city?”

"I did. A job at the Black Salamander. Waitress. Nothing fancy, but it's a paycheque." I placed the same bet as last time. "Is that okay? I could look for more, but..."

"It's fine, hon." Pearly waved a hoof at me. "I owe you. After Bridle Hope was taken, I was lost. I couldn't stay there, but I had nowhere else to go. So thanks for un-losing me. Ain't just anypony what'd do that for a mare." I couldn't help but blush.

Thankfully the cards were dealt and it gave me something else to focus on. A seven and a three. This time I looked around to see what everypony else got. After I was assured no pony else was going to show off with a lucky draw I motioned for him to hit me. This time I got an eight leaving me at a comfortable eighteen. "I'll work out the details." I said to Pearly. "Give me a few days."

"Do it by tomorrow." Pinprick said, oddly without cursing. This made me turn over to hear what she had to say. "Trust me bitch, you don't want to twat around any longer than that. Shit's going down, and it's going down soon. Use your fucking hooves, and move."

"Tomorrow, then..." I said uncertain. The tone in Pinprick's voice took my attention more than the fact I won the hand (along with Flare and Spitshine). "What is going down?"

Pinprick took a swig of her drink (which I didn't notice she had...) and said. "Something. You know that feelin'? Right before the thunder hits? When the brahmin stop mooing, and the molerats vanish? That's the feelin'. Somethin's 'bout to explode, right in this city's fucking face."

"The city always feels like that." Was my reply as the cards were dealt again. "Hit me." I said absentmindedly. It wasn't until after I said it I realized I hit on 21...

"It does? Fuck if I know." She finished her drink and nickered at my call. As if I didn't feel stupid enough. "Still, the bat bitch seems to be worried, so I say you picked a good fucking time to come back to town. Keep your eyes out, and if shit goes wrong I told you fucking so. Cunt."

Spitshine and Pinprick took the hand impressively. It might have something to do with most players being distracted by mine and Prick's conversation. "You know the Batmare?"

"You're looking to an 'official' Super Hero In Training. My momma would be so fucking proud." Spitshine giggled a little giving me the feeling I was missing the joke. "But yeah, bat bitch and I have been tearing this town a new one. She's not simple; acts it, but ain't. For instance did you know she knew you entered the city, an hour 'fore you arrived, and brought me here to Pearly, cause I told her I like that cunt."

"You're not bad yourself hon." Pearly smirked across the table. "A tad vulgar, though."

"Well there's no pissing around about that." The dealer started dealing us again. "Anyway. We've been helpin' each other. We're both 'heroes' so to speak. I help her by getting her some good publicity. That radio dick has a hard on for me, and a hate on for the bat bitch. In return for working with her to improve her cred, she gives me the tips on the biggest busts, ya dig? It all works. We both get to play the fucking 'hero'."

I grumbled at my cards. Two twos. "Hit me." a six. "Hit me." I didn't bother to look at the second card. "Play hero?"

"Hired, Hired." Flare shook his head. "She means she 'acts' like a hero. You know, like a play, or a children's game."

"Fuck off, Flare, I knew that."

"I know what the bitch means. She's askin' if I feel like a fucking hero." She waved a waitress over for another drink. "Which is a stupid ass question for a 'hole nother reason." She chugged her new glass.

"I'm no fucking hero. I've killed more fuckers than I saved, and that's a fucking fact. I counted. Shit like saving ponies an shit is good, but it ain't like washin' out my blood or whatever poetry you want to use. Fact is, I'm a killer, and now I just kill to save ponies. If cunts over the radio wants to call me a hero and use that to inspire them or some shit than sure I'll play along. I ain't like that cunt what opened up the sky, but fuck it, if it helps ponies I'll play their game." she looked over at my cards. "You got blackjack, by the way."

"Huh, oh shit." I grabbed my chips and placed a much larger bet for the next hand. "So Prick, can I ask you something? What is the nature of a hero?"

"Is that some sort of fucking riddle?" She placed her bet. "The way I see it is a 'hero' is a title. And heroes are whoever the most ponies agree are heroes. Like the fuckbringer, or lightbringer. Whatever. How do you think the pegasi fared when half their cities vanished like dust when she pulled the clouds out from under them? When the Enclave up top started fighting for resources like the radio talks about. That shit kills ponies, ponies who get caught in the crossfire. It's the lightfuckers fault, but who down here blames her? Nopony. She's killed ponies, and done things what killed ponies, but she's still a hero because they proclaim her one. That fucking simple." Pinprick sighed when she busted on her last few chips. "Great."

"Sorry mommy, but I won a lot." Spitshine held up her chips, "Looook. I'm kind'a awesome cause of my cutie-mark."

"Yeah." Pinprick smiled warmly and ruffled her daughters mane. "We need to head out, some asshole is planning to raid one of the villages underground, and the bat bitch needs my knife." She looked over at me one last time. "Keep your fucking eye open, if I were you I wouldn't hide your magic eye. See you cunts later." We all said our quick goodbyes as Pinprick cashed in her daughters chips and left.

"She heard I was in town, searched me down, and gave me a bag of caps..." Pearly said a bit bewildered. "Because she knew how much I lost. She is the rudest, most un-agreeable pony I have ever met, and then she does stuff like that." Pearly tossed some caps into a bet. "She's a strange one." She could say that again.

"She's crazier than a bag of fire." Flare, ever so helpfully, said.

"That don't make sense Uncle Flare." Serenity said now that she was no longer pouty about Spitshine having her cutie-mark first. "A bag of fire would burn."

"And that'd be crazy." Flare smirked. "So Pearly, you up for a few more games?"

"Hopefully my luck will improve." Pearly said as she fidgeted with her hat. "Should better without that filly. I swear she won every round." That'd explain how Pinprick could afford to randomly give Pearly money.

"Momma is good luck, don't worry." Serenity said without a hint of humour. She clearly believed that, but why I couldn't imagine. I have been many things, but 'good luck' was not one of them. "Can I play now?"

"Sure, Serenity."

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In the end I was down about fifteen caps, Pearly was up twenty, Flare broke even, and somehow Serenity was up over a hundred. Maybe that dealer just liked cute kids. Or Serenity stole chips. Either was just as likely as the other. After a few hours we had to leave though, so after promising Pearly I'd get her in tomorrow, and waving goodbye we left back for Dise proper. Judging by the time on my pipbuck Haze was either at my apartment, or heading towards it, so I hurried up. I was really looking

forward to this date.

When the three of us barged into the BS I found it... busy. Unnaturally busy. The Black Salamander had always been the least populated of the four major casinos, but today it was full to packing. Many ponies crowded around the roulette wheels or poker tables, but even more were lined up towards the sign labelled 'hospital.'

“Sorry ma'am, we're full up.” A tiny blue mare stuck her hoof out in front of me as I walked through the door. When I looked over I saw only her black and white mane as she wasn't looking at me. “Come back tomorrow.”

“Tight Lips.” I said remembering the security mare from before. “I'm a Hizai, let me through.”

“Huh wha-Hired!” She quite suddenly hugged me. “Well don't that beat all, how've ya been?” She treated me like we were old friends, but we only met twice. “Look at all this business! Don't tell nopony, but it seems like the NCA is gearing up, and have started paying for cybernetics for their ponies. Talk about your A-Grade advertising, am I right?”

“Ya c'n thank me.” Serenity said proudly. “I convinced a general 'bout how cool it was.”

“Oh you did now sweetie, well we should upgrade you too! Free of cost.” Serenity got a really excited look on her face before the mare laughed. “Just kidding, I can't authorize that. I only run Security. Speaking of security, you really shouldn't let alicorns into your room without warning me, otherwise I might just shoot them.” My heart skipped a beat.

“What, ho-”

“Watch.” She tapped the side of her head and a pair of sunglasses slid out of her face. “Lets me see magical signatures, good for seeing stealth-bucks, and invisibility spells. Oh! And I can see through walls. That's cool too.” The sunglasses retracted. “We can't call be super soldiers like Mr. Star, but I have my tricks. I'm sure you have yours too.”

“You didn't... shoot her, did you?” For some reason asking made my throat die. This would have been a terrible start to a date.

“What, no! Hah. Maybe a few weeks ago, but after the sky went poof House sent a memo out. Apparently alicorns were coming south. Not many, but enough to be noticed. Some confused, some sane and running, but still coming. We were told to approach any and ask them if they'd like a job,” The tiny mare laughed. “Wouldn't that be something.”

“I've always said House needs an army of cybernetic alicorns, haven't I been saying that Hired?” Flare seemed amused by this information (maybe he was going to sell it to his boss).

“Haze said no, didn't she?” I said

“Well...” the mare hummed. “She didn't 'say' anything. I think I frightened her, but she did shake her head. A shame. She was a cutie... later I had to send a Finisher up there too. Makes me wonder what exactly you're getting yourself into....” black and white maned mare paused then giggled. “Take pictures!” You know what I really needed more of? Snarky ponies who delighted in seeing my squirm.

With a slight blush, I headed towards the employee only elevators. Which is to say the only elevators I knew about. I was sure there were regular ones, but I never really explored the building. It was too large, and I was too busy. For a given definition of busy.

As we waited for the elevator to go up I asked Flare to take Serenity to the orphanage while I was on the date, and after not to bug us. Which I'm sure he was planning on doing anyway. It was just his style, after all. Hopefully after our little fight he'd be more willing not to fuck up my relationships. Wishful

thinking. To Flare's credit, he did agree, but agreeing and going through with it were two different things. Normally I would have already sent them off, but Serenity was upset last time I wore a dress without her being around. The elevator dinged our arrival and the three of us left into the hallway.

Our doorway was only a short walk away, and we got there without incident. Which is not that surprising. What was I expecting, the hallway to explode?

Without so much as hesitating I opened the door to my spacious apartments. To find Platinum Haze slinking out from behind a curtain set up in the middle of the room. She was garbed in a simple, flowing, purple cotton-embroidered dress in rolling black stitching for decoration. A dusty purple bodice wrapped around the alicorn's chest, laced up the sides in shiny, black ribbon. A rich, red wrap with beaded trim was tied around her neck and draped across her back, hiding the bulges caused by her wings. Simple, black slippers capped each brightly polished, scarlet hoof. Her mane was tied into a braid in such a way it completely hid the fact it was magical and flowy.

"You look..." I said after picking my jaw off the floor, "Amazing." I started to walk into the room only for a strange pony to cut me off. She was a pale purple unicorn mare with a long curly aqua mane (that was darker at the tips) and a fairly standard Finisher dress. She might have been glaring at me, but it was hard to tell beneath those hot pink sun glasses of hers. "Excuse m--"

"Amazing... Amazing!?" The Finisher just shook her head tromping over to the dress. "Look, here. It vas too short, and vat do I do? Add more fabric. Given no time to prepare you can see ze stitching! It's a travesty is vat it is." I had no idea what she was talking about, and I could see nothing. "And zis wrap, it does not match the shoes! Vun is crimson, ze other scarlet. The bodice itself is centuries old, and too tight, look at eet. Dahling, do not call this vork amazing. I am ashamed to have my name on it."

"Uh, I... what." Did I really have to hire the most insane of all The Finishers.

"Hired..." Haze was blushing a red so bright she matched her slippers. "Thank you... we feel... pretty."

The Finisher cut me off with a dramatic sigh. "Vatever you say dahling. Pretty, or vats it."

The pretty alicorn looked over at the finisher and smiled shyly. "T-thank you so much as well. We appreciate what you have done for us, and your discretion."

"Alicorns are above my paygrade." The mare said simply. "I make zee dresses, nothing more. If I told anypony, I would get dragged into the ugly mess, and zat, my dear Haze, is strictly against my non-confrontation policy." The mare waved at me, "Vell, come in. I have much vork to do."

"Uh thanks..." Haze stepped meekly to the side as I, followed by Flare (smirking at me) and Serenity (staring wide eyed at Haze) went in my room. "Who are you?"

"Cross Stitch, dahling. Now right this way. You have this date tonight, right? Too soon, too soon. How am I supposed to vork in these conditions." Cross Stitch gave a dramatic sigh, fixed her glasses, and steeled her expression. "Best get to work then."

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Despite her constant complaints about how she didn't have enough time, how she was overworked, how I was much too large, she did a fantastic job. I had planned just to wear my last Finisher dress, but as it turns out wearing a dress over open burn wounds kind of ruined it. She took one look, spat off to the side, and threw it out and instead made me a sea green evening gown. The smooth fabric shimmered over my large body and, I wasn't a fashion expert but it seemed to accentuate my hips, and I wasn't really sure how I felt drawing attention there. Because Cross could not keep well enough alone she also took the time to do my mane up in a soft bun on the back of my head, held in place by a silver comb with two deep green, flowing ribbons. Carefully I took a few steps and let the dress flow and shimmer

around me. The silver shoes might have been a bit tight, or maybe it was the criss crossing straps that laced up my legs (Only my hind legs, the shoes didn't fit on my cyberleg, and the lace didn't work around my pipbuck) that were tight. I thought about loosening the green buttons that held them on, but Cross looked... crossed at me when I tried.

"You look so pretty mamma!" Serenity bounced around me. "Oooh, the dress is super pretty too. Oh! I just had the best idea. Make the dress a weapon." I careened my head around to see her playing with some of the fabric on the hem of the dress. "Add some wires, a few blades, when somepony comes close ya press'a button and the dress poofs out and sends blades flying in every direction. It'd be so awesome!"

"She certainly has an... imagination, dahling." The Finisher looked down at my filly from behind her glasses. That was one way to put it.

"Serenity is currently working on a way to make everything robots." Flare had stayed to watch me transform from ugly to slightly less ugly. "Ponies, dresses, food, toys. With Serenity the sky's the limit. Meaning I'm sure she wants to make a cybernetic sky."

"That doesn't even make sense," Serenity said after sticking her tongue out.

"We think you look amazing," Haze said breathily, and that was all I needed to hear. "W-we are glad you agreed to give us a second chance. We are just worried about being... seen by so many ponies." She gulped.

"You look marvellous dahling, truly. Don't vorry your pretty little head of," the Finisher said with a smile despite the fact she was disparaging the dress not that long ago. "And nopony vill notice your wings. Just do not touch that wrap, and it vill be fine. But I must go, I vill send a bill." She started to the door after packing up her supplies.

"Wait." I said as Cross was near the door. She obediently did so, and turned back to me. "You really don't care? About Haze?"

"Above my paygrade dahling. Have fun." She walked out, leaving me with mixed feelings about the dressmaking mare. She clearly did a very good job with limited supplies and time, but on the other hoof she kind of annoyed me.

"Yeah, guess I should head off now too, before you put my head on a spike." Flare chuckled. "C'mon Serenity, give the lovebirds some privacy." he said, nudging at Serenity some. Despite my professed forgiveness, I was still a little bit sore over what transpired between Flare and me, but I tried my best to work through it and gave him a little bit of a grin.

Serenity didn't follow right away, because first she had to run over and hug my legs. "Have fun, Momma!" Then she put on her most serious expression and said very sternly. "And no hanky panky!" It was hard work to both not laugh and not blush at that proclamation, but somehow I managed.

"Good." She trotted off beside Flare before turning back one last time. "I'm serious!"

When the door closed that left me and Haze. Alone. Together. All prettied up. The awkward silence was deafening.

"So..." I said slowly.

"Yes... so..." Came the reply.

The silence continued.

"Uh..."

"Um..."

The silence would have continued but for some reason I couldn't help but laugh. Maybe because the situation was silly, or maybe it was just my way of releasing tension. Whatever the case I giggled like a little filly, and soon Haze joined me. By the time we were done the awkwardness had burned away.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I managed to get out after the giggle fit. “Go out I mean.”

“We... are nervous. But we believe it is a good move. We wish to be with you, and it will be fun. In addition it is a good way to test the waters. To see how ponies react to us so we can better judge when we can come out of hiding.” She carefully adjusted her bodice with her magic. “If we ever can.”

I made a sweeping movement with my hoof towards the door, “Shall we go? After you.” Haze nodded and started walking towards the door, and I quickly followed. However, as I came near the exit to my apartment I noticed that my B.E.L. that I left there had vanished. With a sigh I resigned myself to the fact that Flare probably touched and moved it. Normally I would go look to make sure... but I was going on a date with an alicorn, and thus quite distracted.

The hallway was empty when we left my apartment so I took the opportunity to sidle up close to Haze, an act which enticed an approving smirk from the shy alicorn. “We are not sure you should be so close, you might wrinkle the dresses.” There was a teasing quality to her voice so I didn't take her seriously.

“They'll get better.” It was an effort, but I managed to reach up and nuzzle Haze by carefully balancing momentarily on my hind legs. “I'm glad... you don't hate me.” Though by all rights she probably should have.

“We do not hate anyone,” she said as we entered the elevator and headed downstairs. Part of me wanted to question what she meant by that. It was nice not to be hated, but it could still mean she disapproved with who I was, but refused to fall into hate. Or maybe she actually liked me, and was being genuine. It was such an ambiguous statement that I wasn't quite sure what she meant. Nervously I clicked at the ground with my uncomfortable shoes.

Maybe I would bring it up at dinner, but at that time I didn't. As we got closer to the ground floor I could see her nervousness grow. She seemed to be looking around the elevator (which was a bit too small for her) in a twitching fashion, and twice I saw her prepare for a spell she never cast. “It'll be fine,” I said trying to be comforting. When she smiled at me, I could tell it was fraught with anxiety, but it was something.

The elevator stopped on the fifth floor and I felt my heart jump into my chest. Slowly the mechanical doors opened showing a sterile white hall and a green pony with a white doctor's coat standing there. He gaped up at Haze for a second, before looking at me. Something must have clicked in his head because he just nodded at me, and entered without issue. As soon as he turned around to face the door I looked up at Haze and gulped.

There was neither a response from Haze or the anonymous doctor pony, and when the door finally opened everypony left and nothing was said of the incident. Haze and I hung back as the doctor walked towards the exit. “You're okay?”

“Yes...” she said slowly. “That went better than expected.” That was good enough for me, so I let her take a few breaths to calm herself, and headed towards the casino floor. I really hoped that it wasn't as crowded as before.

Like most of the time my hopes were dashed to pieces. The casino was as crowded as earlier, and the huge line to the cybernetic office was even larger. It seemed to snake out the front door, and presumably down the street. When I looked up to see if Haze was okay with this many ponies seeing her, her eyes were wide, and scanning the room. I tried to be comforting, and slid up beside her. “You'll be fine.”

We stood there looking out into the casino floor for a long while before we made the first step. Nopony looked at us, and if they did it was just a passing glance. As we walked to the exit few, if any, ponies noticed the giant unicorn in a fancy dress. We lived in a city run by themed gangs, under the threat of war with bipedal cows, and plagued by mutant scorpions and land sharks. Platinum Haze was weird, but not enough for the city to actually care. Just a large unicorn. If she had wings though, that'd be different. Until then we walked into the dark night free from judgement. She had to hide who she was, but it made me happy she was able to walk and be seen at all.

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“So you won't fight, ever?” I asked between mouth fulls of some sort of soup... thing.

We had managed to make it to the Alehouse without so much as a sideways glance. The Casino was a different story, where the guard at the front desk both recognized me (casually mentioning that Molly had been walking the casino floor today and winking at me) and nearly didn't let Haze in for fear of the other patrons. I got around this by glowering and being fucking terrifying. Even in all my finery it was clear I was not to be messed with.

Once inside everything went smoothly. We made our way through the long hall (with strangely high ceilings) that led to the arena, casino, and various restaurants. The fanciest of the restaurants was called The White Tie. At first the waiter at the front did not want to let me in because we didn't have reservation, but I was good at glaring. The restaurant itself was in a fancy room with high arcing ceilings, and a series of large tables with some sort of cloth on them. It was spacious though, and surprisingly empty. We were led to a table off to the side beside a family (a mother, father, and colt), and ordered our food.

Then we started our date. It was fun, we talked easily. And I never talk easily.

“Never,” she answered, floating a little sandwich over to nibble at it. “We firmly believe in anti-aggression. If the wasteland is ever to recover, we must change the way it operates. We have become a violent species, prone to anger and violence, and this must be changed.” Her voice was quiet, as it had been all night, but she sounded more sure about that statement than anything else I heard her say.

“But...” I hummed for a second and took a drink of the fruity alcoholic beverage that we were served. “Sometimes you can't not fight. There are raiders. And worse. Sometimes...” It was a shallow justification for me, but for many ponies it would be the truth.

She nodded slowly and sighed. “This is something we understand. We do not approve of violence, and will mourn all deaths, but we understand it is... inevitable. Not for us though. Mother has given us a great power. We are strong enough to live without violence, as you saw. So we will never strike another, an example to what can be done. That is our core principle.”

“Even when the world wants to kill you?”

“Especially when the world wants to kill us.” What else could I say about that? It was amazing, beautiful, and really naive and stupid. Yet she spoke the words with such confidence it was hard not to believe her. It must have been hard for her. Taken to some vats to be forcefully transformed, put into some sort of mind hive thing, then forcefully taken out of it into a world that seemed to despise her very existence. Yet there she was, determined to do no harm, or die trying. “W-what.” A blush formed on my cheeks when I realized I'd been staring.

“Sorry.” I quickly lowered my eyes. “It's just... you're insane.” A smile formed on my face. I felt giddy, and I wasn't sure why.

“That is mea-”

“It's a good thing. You're taking a stand, despite... everything.” I said with my head raised so she could see me smile. “It's. Good. You're a better pony than I.”

“We... uh.” She gave me a blush and occupied her mouth with a sandwich. When she finally swallowed she said, “Thank you, we appreciate the sentiment. We do not think we are a good pony. But... thank you.” If Platinum Haze wasn't a good pony, I couldn't imagine who could possibly be one.

With a bit of a giggle I said, “Yeah. The alicorn who runs an orphanage for free, and refuses to turn a hoof against her aggressors who hate her for no reason is not a good pony.” With a sly smile I shook my head, and then finished my soup. “You're the best pony I know... which is not as much as a compliment as it should be. This city does not breed good ponies.”

“What about Serenity?” Haze smirked.

“She's from Eye Glow.”

“Was she raised here?” Haze gave a little smile. To be honest I wasn't sure.

“She's never told me... she doesn't talk much about her past.” Though I was never sure why. Maybe I wasn't asking the right questions. “Wherever she grew up, she grew up well. She is so smart. Have you seen her do magic? She doesn't even have her cutie-mark. Not to mention she made a leg once. A cybernetic one. And it worked. She's just a filly. Fillies shouldn't be that talented. You should have seen her in the Reconstruction Center. There we are in a hostile environment. With no hope. But she doesn't seem fazed. She even told me to get some rest when we had the chance. ”

“You must be really fond of her.” Haze smiled warmly making me realize I'd been monologuing about how awesome my daughter was. “It is cute.”

“I... uh.” I had attempted to gather my thoughts by eating something, but I'd already finished my meal. “She's my daughter.” I said blushing. “So I love her. I'm just... bad at it. After last time...”

“You mean Karkhoof.” Fuck. I said that out loud didn't I? And then she had to go and mention Karkhoof. My Two biggest failures in one nice little package. Now if only somepony could bring up Wildfire too and let the my combined guilt drive me insane. More insane. “Not Karkhoof?” She seemed to be able to read my pained expression.

“Not Karkhoof...” When Haze messed up that memory spell before, I had managed to stop her before she got to that memory, and thank Celestia for that. But it would always come up. It seemed the more I ran away from Foundation, the more she haunted me. Maybe I should just accept her... fate. But that was... I couldn't. I couldn't go back there. I took a heavy breath and closed my eye. Just needed to think about... something, anything.

“It is okay.” I felt Haze's hoof being laid atop mine. “You don't need to talk about it. We're sorry. When you're ready though, we will always be there for you.” My eye opened and I saw Haze's. They were remarkable, and beautiful. They shown a golden yellow hue, and were slit down like a cats, and they sparkled in the light of the restaurant. It was when I first saw her eyes that I started crushing on her. It was corny, but... true. She was simply beautiful, not just her eyes. Everything about her was made in a way that shine beauty and grace. Admittedly she was not that graceful, but I didn't really care.

“Thanks I...” blushed and looked down. “You're too good for me. You deserve better.”

“But we desire you.” That was just cheesy, so I chuckled. “What? Did we say something wrong. We are quite serious. We have explained ourselves earlier, did we not. Why are you still laughing. Silver? Are you okay. Oh, we said something wrong didn't we. We're sorry. Silver, We-”

I leaned over the table, to kiss her. It seemed really effective in stopping her nervous rambling.

“Would you like desert, ma'ams?”

My kiss was halted halfway across the table leaving me in an awkward and embarrassing position.

“No.” I growled, hoping she'd go away.

“But I insist.”

“Listen I-” When I turned my head to chew the waitress out I instead saw a green pony with a tied back mane, and a black cowpony hat. Sorry, not a pony. A mule. “Molly.” As I said her name one of the molly's ears flopped out from under her hat. “Hello. It has been. A while.” Carefully I sat back in my stool keeping my eyes trained on the molly.

“You know her?” Haze seemed a bit shocked at both her arrival and my reaction.

“Oh we know each other, little dove.” Molly said pushing her ear back into place. “Me and your little rat go way back.” A few weeks was hardly way back. “She did a job for me once, then stabbed me in the back.” My eyes went to Molly's side where her sawed off shotgun hung. I remembered the video I saw the day before, and tried my best not to piss herself off. The dress was new after all, and I'd hate to get blood on it.

“If I remember. You had ponies stab me. Literally. And I did your job. I just did other jobs too.” And killed Roy Mustang. Of course, she didn't know that. At least I hoped she didn't. “What do you want, Molly?”

“Just this, my little rat. If you come into my home again, I'll send my cats to kill and eat you.” She lowered herself down and glared. “You're in my world here, and you weren't invited. When rats infest my world, I exterminate them.” Or send cats, she could at least get her metaphor right. That's right, I know what metaphor means. “Your status as a cybernetic freak means I can't attack you without reprisal, but you're stretching my patience here, Hired.”

“Let me finished my-” I tried to say meal, but she cut me off. For some reason I got the impression she didn't like me.

“No.” With a hoof she knocked the contents of the table onto the floor. That just was not necessary.

“Leave now.”

“Excuse us.” Haze started to stand up and let her full impressive be seen. She absolutely towered over Molly. “We think you are being rude. We paid to eat, and we should be allowed to eat in peace. We humbly request we can finish our meal, then we shall leave, and never return.

“No.” Molly's hoof moved towards the shotgun. Time seemed to slow.

When I turned on SATS, time actually slowed. Every other time I used my pipbuck in that manner something went wrong, but this time she was close, and I had my hooves. There was no way I was going to even let Molly point a gun in her direction. I selected her torso, and slipped out of the spell.

As if driven by instinct my body slammed into Molly's sending us both to the ground. I managed to get the other hoof partially pinning her to the ground. She was fumbling for her shotgun though. And slippery. I couldn't pin her properly. There was a vague sense of screaming in the background, but when I fought I could only focus on my opponent. Even with me pressing against her, that shotgun of hers found its way to her mouth.

As quickly as I could I switched SATS on again, and aimed for her shotgun. Falling out of it my cybernetic hoof batted the shotgun to the side. The slug went off course and slammed into my table. She aimed again and I didn't have the position to hit it again. Grunting in annoyance I rolled off Molly letting her slug hit the air where I was seconds ago. My body was slick with sweat already, and The Finishers were going to be so mad about me ruining their dress.

“HIRED!” My eyes darted to haze. Shit. The father of the family sitting beside her was stabbing at her shield with a fore-hoof blade. Apparently Molly knew we were here and prepared for a fight. In the attack it looked like her dress was cut, and her red wrap that hid her wings fell on the ground. She seemed unhurt, by the by, but everyone in the vicinity could see the wing bulges on her back. It didn't help the fight was drawing the attention of everyone in the restaurant. “We need to leave!” She yelled over at me.

“Yeah I-” Something slammed into the bun my mane was tied into. I turned my head to see Molly there with her shotgun, because I was an idiot and didn't take off my eyepatch for the fight.

She aimed her shotgun at me again, and I waited for the pain. Instead if felt my body get light, and my shoulder burn. The slug passed below me as I was lifted up in a magical field. A few seconds later I was dropped on Platinum Haze's back. She carefully pushed away the assassin away with her magic, casted invisibility over both of us, burst her wings through the dresses weakened fabric, and took to the air.

The invisibility was confusing enough to have Molly, and the assassin attack where we were, and even though the rooms ceiling wasn't high, there was enough room to manoeuvre. My ride quickly flew to the exit (some of the ponies inside ran away at the sound of the fight, other moved towards the conflict. Whatever the case the exit was nearly empty by the time we got there.

“Listen for the sound of flapping wings!” Molly ordered. “And the feeling of wind.” Good advice.

“Thanks, hurry.” I whispered into where I assumed Haze's ear was. I wasn't really sure as I couldn't see her. It was not comforting to be floating in the air and not see anything underneath you.

We flew through the doors to the main hall of the casino, which unfortunately made them swing wildly. There was a vague sound of noise behind us as we sped towards the exit, but I didn't pay attention. Thankfully the hallways were high enough to fly unimpeded. The race lasted until we burst from the casinos double doors, and into the night.

Looking up at the stars I smiled a bit at them. That was until I started to move *towards* them. “No!” I nearly screamed as my heart started to race, and I wrapped my forelegs around Haze's neck to keep me safe. “Please, don't.” With my eyes open I could see the ground slowly shrinking below us, and still invisible there was nothing between us. Just me and the ground. Falling. “Please, go down.”

“We do not understand we need t-”

“I'm afraid of heights.” I blurted out squeezing my eyes shut. It didn't help. I still could feel the fight, and I could feel myself getting higher. Fuck. Earth ponies should stay on the earth, dammit.

“S-sorry.” As I felt out descent relief filled me., That was. Better. Much better. Not enough to stop me from panicking, or convince me to open my eyes. “We did not know.”

When we reached the ground in front of the BS I slowly got off her back and onto shaky hooves. I really hated heights. I blamed pegasi for making other ponies yearn to take to the sky. It was just not needed. Just... yeah. Eventually I managed to calm my nerves enough to look up at Haze. “Uh... sorry.”

“No we are sorry. We should not have talked back to Molly, it caused the conflict...” she blushed. “We simply wanted to eat in peace. We are sorry we ruined the evening.”

“No... you didn't...” I chuckled. “I did. The clusterbuck that is my past likes to catch up with me so it can kick my face in.”

“No, we-”

“Can we just kiss now?” A cool breeze blew my now tattered mane into my face, and I had to quickly

brush it away to keep my eyes on Haze. She looked especially beautiful in the moonlight.

“Certainly.” We leaned forward once more. My whole body felt tingly. This whole night had been great, barring the minor mess up at the end. It reminded me that everything could work. I could get through my past, and maybe some time in the future I could grow to love Haze. Not now, but it was a possibility I never thought I'd have after Wildfire died. This kiss meant everything. The final reassurance. The icing on the cake. The-

“Hired?”

Oh come on!

My brain snapped out of its bleary Haze induced haze and I looked towards the sound of the voice. A deep crimson pony was walking out of The BS with a metal left foreleg. “I was just looking for you.” Mayhem. The leader of the Mustangs. And he was looking for me so hard he ruined my kiss. Of course since Haze's wings were free she went invisible at the noise making it look like I was trying to kiss the air. Which helped. A lot.

“Why?” Very carefully I moved myself to make it look less like I was trying to kiss the air, and more like I was just taking an awkward step. “What do The Mustangs want with me?”

“You.” He shook his head walking forward slowly. He seemed strangely unarmed. “Do you remember last time you were in town? You owe me a job. No questions asked. With absolute loyalty.” Shit shit shit.

“Yes... I remember.” I said bitterly. “What is it?”

“Come to my office tomorrow in the morning.” The large crimson buck said with a sly grin. “We'll talk then. It's good you're back. I hate to cash in so soon, but it is important.” He laughed and started walking towards his casino. “Goodnight Hired. Sleep well. You'll need it.”

Haze did not reappear until he was halfway down the street, and when she did she was glaring down the street to where he went. As she glared she said with the most vicious tone I've ever heard from her. “Stallions!”

I wasn't sure if that was a rebuke of him, or all stallions, but I couldn't help but laugh. “Stallions.” I agreed wholeheartedly.

Level Up!

New Perk: Terrifying Presence: You have been using this perk since you left Marefort, so it was about time you got it officially. With it you can scare the shit out of just about anypony, and get them to bend to your will.

((A/N: Another slow chapter, but I think Silver deserves a rest. Thank you all for reading. Tonights chapters was brought to you by Kkat, who created FOE and in turn let me write this, as well as theBSDude, Mint Julep, and Menti who edit my work and make it suck less. One of my editors were sick this week, so I may have missed a few errors. If you spot anything please PM me so I can fix them! Thank you lovelies. The lovely dresses you read about were the product of the mind of Kashin author of [Operation Flankorage](#). Read it if you like dresses and death. Next chapter is my official anniversary chapter, if I had planned ahead I would have something special for you all, but alas... ~No One~))

## Chapter 24: Nature Of A Hero

*Sometimes the light at the end of the tunnel is the headlamp of an oncoming train.*

I woke up feeling warm and happy. That's right, I woke up happy. Take that, nightmares, you lose this round. Of course that made it about three to five hundred, but it was something. Since I was already having a good morning I decided to murmur my approval and snuggled up with Platinum Haze. She had spent the night, but there was no 'hanky panky' involved. Just cuddling, and I was okay with that. Take things slow so my neuroses didn't explode twice.

"Good morning, Silver..." Haze's voice sounded beautiful. "Did you sleep well?" I nodded into her coat. "Are you sure? You seemed... distressed. Did you have a nightmare?" Probably. I couldn't remember. Dreams are tricky like that. Nightmares were my speciality, so it was safe to assume.

"Maybe," I mumbled. "Lots of nightmares."

"Did you want to talk about them?" About as much as I wanted to talk about Foundation.

Before I could answer though, the door to my room burst open, and I heard the pitter-patter of hooves running towards my bed. "GERONIMO!" A ball of pink fur slammed into my chest, making me gasp. "Hi Momma, how was the date? You're sleeping in the same bed, that's suspicious. Nothin' better of happened, cause you said ya wouldn't. I already had breakfast, Flare give me sugar apple bombs. They're delicious!"

"I'm sure they are." I rubbed at my eyes with my foreleg. "Can you get off me?"

"Your boss wanted to see you, better hurry up." I looked over to see Flare standing by the door, faking a smile. I wasn't sure why House wanted to see me. There were still a few days left before I had to go to work, at least that's what he'd said before. If he'd changed his mind, I would be annoyed.

"Right." Part of me wanted to stay in bed next to Platinum Haze forever, but we both had work to do. "Serenity," I said again. That was all it took to get her off me, which gave me room to roll off the bed and trudge to the bathroom. "Be right back." Before I went in, I grabbed my saddlebags and dragged them with me.

When the door was safely closed behind me, I sheepishly slumped to the sink. After splashing water in my face, I looked at the cracked mirror above the tap and sighed. Just as ugly as the last time I'd checked. Though my mane was starting to grow out even more, which gave me an idea. I carefully grabbed the hairbrush in my fetlock I started to brush at my mane. It wasn't easy because, as an earth pony my magic-less existence made manoeuvring things difficult, but also because my mane was a tattered mess of sweat and knots. After some considerable effort, I managed to brush a lot of my pink and white mane so it was hanging over the right side of my face, covering at least some of my scars and part of my eye-patch. It wasn't a perfect solution, but it'd work.

With that done I looked into the medicine compartment of my saddlebags. There was a tightness in my gut when I realized I was starting to run out of Med-X. I would have to buy more later, but doing that without anyone seeing would be the trick. Either that or I could request some from House, but I wasn't sure I wanted him to know. Every option seemed like it was going to lead to trouble. We had more important things to deal with, but I knew my companions wouldn't let it go.

Pushing the thoughts out of my mind, I decided to deal with the problem later. Instead, I gave myself a dose of Med-X (which made me feel much better about the whole situation) and tossed the container

out.

“Momma, come see!” a muffled voice said through the door. Before I even opened the door I knew whatever she was doing was either completely adorable or dangerous enough to give me a heart attack.

When I opened the door I was glad it was the adorable option.

Haze had lifted up Serenity in her magic and was floating her around in a circle as Serenity stretched her legs out as if she herself was doing all the work. “Look! I'm flying.” That she was. “Make me do a loop!” As ordered, Haze used her magic and suddenly Serenity was doing loop-de-loops that would make Flare jealous.

“You're talented.” I smirked.

“She really wanted to fly,” Haze explained. “And we just could not deny her.” Serenity did one final flip before Haze let her drop safely on the bed, which of course made Serenity pout.

“I know that feeling.” I walked over to the alicorn and nuzzled her cheek.

“Momma's a liar,” Serenity said. “Momma denies me all the time.”

“Only when she wants cybernetics,” I explained to Haze. “She's obsessed.” Serenity didn't even try to argue that because it was simply true.

“So we have heard. We think it is a noble pursuit, and that it is good she takes such interests at a young age. We are sure it will not be long before you find your cutie mark at this rate.” She smiled at Serenity, but for some reason Serenity seemed a little upset about the proclamation. “Uh...” Haze noticed the frown and wasn't sure what to say. “Anyway. We are afraid we must take our leave. Diamond Sky will be waiting for our return, and we cannot put off our work.”

“It's fine. I uh... had a good time.” I felt my cheeks start to get warm; Flare nickering confirmed that for me.

“We did as well...” She kicked at the ground.

“Yes well...” I gulped.

“Kiss!” Flare suggested in a manner that definitely did not make me want to kick him. Luckily for him, Haze took his suggestion to heart and I was too distracted by alicorn snogs for my daily pegasus beating. “Ew, mares!” Flare added. At that point I had to break away the kiss because I was giggling.

“Your friend is quite silly.” Haze was giggling too, and I noticed she too was blushing.

“Not the word I'd use.” Among my top adjectives for Flare were: annoying, aggravating, frustrating, and slightly amusing. “See you later?”

“Yes!” She blushed. “We mean... Yes, if you wish visit us at any time, and we will try to take time out to speak with you.” She kissed my cheek, walked over to the window, opened it, turned invisible, and presumably flew out. My eyes stayed fixed on the spot she had last been for a good minute. Part of me felt nervous, though I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because I lived a hectic, and often deadly life, and that could be the last time I saw her. Or I was simply worrying too much.

“Momma.” My eyes darted over to Serenity. “There better not'a been any hanky panky.” Why was my daughter was interrogating me about my sex life? It was just wrong on so many levels; I didn't answer. I walked out the door and pretended my life still made sense.

We made our way to House's office, and as usual found him staring thoughtfully out of his really large windows. The first thing he said when we entered was that I had a job to do, which was annoying because I was supposed to be on break. So much for resting.

“You said I have the rest of the week off...” Was my obvious reply.

“Things have changed.” He turned around to look at me. It may have been my imagination but he actually looked sorry. “You have heard the Chairpony of the NCA is coming to Dise to give a speech about the Minotaur struggle?” I nodded. Lucky had mentioned it. “It's today. Apparently it is important, as the minotaur king is going to be there, and the NCA has requested guards from all groups in Dise be present in a show of solidarity. It seems like an official treaty is going to be signed.”

“And I need to go?” That made no sense. I was not a security specialist by any stretch of imagination, and the Hizai had an entire contingent of Security personal.

“I'm sorry, yes.” He walked over to his over-large computer system and pressed a few buttons. Not that I knew enough about how computers worked to actually explain what he did. “I got a request by Major General Hailstorm to send at least one agent with cybernetic eyes. She wants somepony up high to monitor the minotaurs that will be there. Tell her which are aggressive, and which were the most dangerous in case something went wrong. Unfortunately everypony else with that specific augmentation is out on a critical mission, so it's up to you.” The thought of being up high sent shivers down my spine, and if this was today that ruined that whole 'getting off drugs' thing Flare had set up. I'd try to hide my disappointment.

“Lovely. Is it tonight?”

“This evening, at the NCA train station. You'll go through the main gate, and go with the rest of the guards. Try not to fight with any Galaicians, Mustangs, or Baises...” he looked back at me. “The Finishers are sending a few too, you can fight with them if you want.” But I rather liked the Finishers. At least when they weren't drugging me. “Once you're there, you'll report directly to the Major General. You'll find her in the back of the station on the furthest rail-car. And Hired.” He walked over at me to glare face to face. “Do not fuck with her. She holds a lot of power, and I would like for us to be on friendly terms.”

“Sure.” What, did he think I was going to kick her in the face or something? I wasn't that dumb. “Oh, yeah, I found something...” The ghoul raised an eyebrow at me. “Serenity, could you get the documents?” it was just easier than looking through with my mouth.

“Sure, Momma!” A few seconds later the documents I'd found in the tunnels were floating out in front of my in a pink glow.

“What are these...” he started to flip through one to the end, and his eyes went wide as he saw the signature. “Wallkirk... where did you?”

“An old office of his in the-”

“My men found that office years ago.” he cut me off.

“Secret compartment of one of his drawers.” I continued pretending not to hear his interruption. “It was protected by a magical shield. It was poorly designed. They might be interesting.” I motioned at the documents. “Very interesting.”

“Humm, I will take a look...” his voice sounded kind of distant as he read. “You should be going, you need to be gone in an hour and a half.” Even better. “You'll get paid double though. Now go...” he trotted off awkwardly still reading the documents. I guess I did that right at least.

“Can't you go anywhere without stumbling across an ancient secret?”

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Before I could go anywhere else I tracked down Starscream and bugged him until he gave me a

passport into the city so I could get Pearly inside. After that I finally left the BS.

We didn't have much time to meet Mayhem before we had to go with the other gang members to the train station, so we hoofed it down to The Moon as fast we could. Well I did, while Serenity and Flare followed. Though I did take the time to explain why I had to go they didn't understand. It didn't seem that complicated. If you say you're going to do a job, you do it. If I couldn't do that I would be pretty bad at my job. I was a Hired Gun after all, and if a gun constantly misfires, you get a new gun.

Once inside I had expected to be ushered down to the secret room in the basement where Mayhem normally took his office. Instead the guard who was expecting me (who was the bartender when I used to work there) took me to a side office that I was pretty sure used to be a bathroom. The floor was still tiled, and the remains of plumbing could be seen, but it seemed he was trying to fit it up given the newish wallpaper.

Once I entered I saw Mayhem pacing nervously. His metal hoof clacked against the tiled floor as he did. "Hired." He turned his dark eyes to me. "You're late. I almost thought you weren't going to show. I'd offer you a seat but..." he looked around. "Well it's not ready. So stand an-" he looked around me to see Flare and Serenity walking after and very subtly adjusted the mini-gun on his back. "Your friends will have to wait outside."

"But I always getta listen when Momma goes into secret meetings."

"You heard the large stallion with the large gun." Flare tugged her back. "Give them space."

As Serenity was drug out of the room she thought it was a good idea to say, "But Momma is bigger, and has a big gun too!"

"Precocious scamp." Mayhem watched her leave. "Now for you, how have you been?" He tilted his head and eyed the side of my face I had half-hidden behind my mane. "If my spies are correct you've been a busy mare. Fighting tough-ass raiders in the north, escaping the steel rangers... twice. Then you came back, and got into a fight with Molly." He recited from memory. "How are you not dead yet?"

"Not for want of trying." I scratched at the scars on my face that paid tribute to that fact. "I'm bad at dying."

"Evidently. Well I'm sure that'll be rectified in short order." He smiled and leaned against the wall. "I knew you were something as soon as you came into the city. Roy let me handle a lot of recruitment work, and I have ponies searching the street looking for good mercs. When I heard about a giant of a mare walking into a drug dealer base and cleaning it, well I had to have her. Then you show up, drunk and horny. Well it was easy to get you into debt. Then you killed Roy, and I knew I had a winner. It's a shame you had to go for House, I could make better use of you."

"I'm not an asset to be traded and used." I levelled my one eyed glare at him.

"You are, I am, we all are. Welcome to Dise, you must be new here." he laughed. "Oh, I missed you. Do you remember the night Roy died?" Of course I did. It was before the clouds cleared, mercilessly dark, and slightly warm. It felt like the muggy day before a thunderstorm. "I do to." he tapped his metal leg. "Lost my leg, and gained a gang. A fair trade. I would have lost more, but, unlike Roy, I knew you were full of shit."

"I didn't break my contract..." My voice sounded a bit defensive. I worked hard to always to my work to the letter.

"Of course not, you did everything as ordered I'm sure. How many ponies were you working for that night?" I just smirked. "Right, a secret. I knew, and I prepared a counter attack... it didn't work as well as I'd hoped, but it was enough to stop her from torching the building. Tell me, why did you kill Roy?"

“He pissed me off.”

“You know.” He grinned. “I have a contract for any one job, I could make you tell me.” That would suck. I rather liked the fact that nopony could figure it out. “No matter, I have a better job. I'm sure House picked you to be one of his guards going down to help 'keep the peace' during the speech.”

“Spies?” I took a wild guess. He was always bragging about his spies.

“Of course.” He walked towards me, “Listen, the speech will be attended by the 'Minotaur King'. If anything happens, I need you to escort him out. Defend him with your life. Is that clear?” I just stared at him blankly. “A deal is a deal; if anything happens, you get him out of there. You don't want to break a contract, do you?”

“Okay.” This was going to suck. “I'll do it. I'm not going to kill NCA troopers to do it though.”

“If you must, you will.” His gaze hardened.

“No.” If Haze could survive with the entire city wanting her dead, I could manage with just a few hundred ponies. “I'll find another way.” There is always a better way. “Hopefully it won't come to that.”

“Speak for yourself.” he barked laughter. “A little explosion is a good way to spice up a day of boring speeches. You're probably late, so go now. Remember the deal.” He narrowed his eyes. “Please don't fail me.” Well, he did ask nicely. “Oh, and one caveat, don't tell your pegasus, or little filly. If nothing happens, I don't want this spreading to the Remnants and the Watchers. Also, no telling Mr. House, or anypony affiliated with him.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved a hoof and walked out the door. “So many rules.”

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“Hey, Hired?” Flare said. We had left The Moon and were just past the Dise main gates (The ponitrons gave us dirty looks) “Weren't we supposed to do something today.” Huh, oh yeah. The Detox. I had intentionally forgot.

“Right.” I shrugged and headed down the street towards the casino Pearly was staying at. “It'll have to wait for another time.” I was so heartbroken about it. Looking at Flare, he felt the exact same way. I wasn't entirely sure what my feelings were on that, but I didn't push the issue. Take what small victories I could get. If that was a victory. I didn't even know anymore.

“Alright. I'll talk to them when we get back.” He flapped into the air, “In the meantime, while you talk with the apple mare, I have a few contacts. Could go find something to tide us over.” Oh Celestia, yes! I mean, sure okay. I guess... I nodded at him, and hoofed some caps. “Shouldn't take long, meet you outside the casino.” He flew straight up, looked around, and dashed off.

I didn't mean to make that pun.

We made our way through the fairly busy street to the casino. Upon entering I was instantly greeted by Pearly sitting at a nearby table. “Hon! There you are. I've been waitin'. These ponies don't seem ta like me loitering none.” she waved a hoof at the ponies working the front desk. “Apparently I don't have enough for another night, so it's good that ya came.” She shook her head. “Spent too much gambling, oh well.”

“Here.” I placed the passport on the table. “Good news. Got you into the city. Report to the BS and they'll get you to work.”

“Aw, thanks Hon.” She got off the chair and stuck her tongue out at the desk ponies. “They'll want me out as soon as possible, so I can't stay'n chat. Y'all look busy too.” She kissed my cheek. “Stay safe, I'll

head right over. We c'n talk later, hon, see ya.” And she walked off towards the stairs presumably to gather her things. I had hoped to talk to her for a little longer, if only because I liked talking to Pearly.

“Momma, ya shouldn't kiss other mares,” Serenity said from her perch on my back.

“I have no interest in her. Just Haze.” I paused and turned to her. “Just in case, don't tell her. It meant nothing. Just don't want her getting the wrong idea.” Most of all, I didn't want Diamond Sky to skewer me if she misunderstood.

“Sooooo, it don't mean nothin' but ya still want me ta keep it a secret.” She narrowed her eyes. “Suspicious.”

In truth, I wasn't really worried about Haze or Diamond knowing that Pearly existed, but I was worried about them hearing the wrong thing and getting the wrong impression. Both of them were smart enough to know I had no interest in Pearly, but if someone like Flare made a joke that was misunderstood, then it could be an issue, and I would rather not be killed over a misunderstanding. Serenity was probably joking anyway.

Of course that just made me think of Platinum Haze and start to worry about her. Or, rather about us. My whole plan was to move slow so we wouldn't be overwhelmed, but I couldn't help but think maybe we were moving too fast. Of course, I wasn't sure what was fast and what was slow. The only pony I ever dated before was Wildfire, and that just sort of happened. There hadn't been any dates, or defining moments, just a subtle transition. This was brand new territory, and utterly terrifying, and could end horribly, especially if I kept comparing her to Wildfire.

It was a sad thought, but no matter how much I liked Haze, Wildfire was foremost in my heart. It wasn't fair to Haze, but it was hard to remove my feelings for Wildfire.

Right, depressing thoughts go away, I had a job to do. When I exited the casino it was a surprise to find that Flare was not waiting for me, instead it was Pinprick.

“Hey cunt.” The grey earth pony grinned at me. “You're late as fucking usual. You're lucky this bitch is looking out for you.” She looked a little scuffed up, and her right foreleg was bandaged. It must have been from that bust she mentioned the day before. “And if you're wondering how the shit I know, the Batmare just happened to be eavesdropping on you this morning. Don't ask how or why, the bitch can teleport after all, and maybe she wanted ta make sure ya were comin'”

“Hi, prisoner.” Spitshine poked her head out from around her mother's legs. “Momma n' I got into a fight yesterday, but we're good now, are you?” Her mane seemed shorter than the day before, and it might have been my imagination but it looked slightly singed. “Ya didn't fight; ya dated, I heard. That's much worse.”

“I'm fine.” I smirked at the filly who still seemed to think I was her prisoner despite the fact I hadn't been since my first few days in Caledonia. “And well rested. Very well rested.” I looked up at Pinprick, “You're going to be a guard at the speech too?” She didn't look the guard type.

“Well, not 'fically. But it turns out some of the assassins what Molly hired don't actually communicate with each other, so I found one lonely bitch, knocked her out and.” she tapped the pipbuck like device on her foreleg. “It comes with an identification chip.” she barked laughter. “So I'm a fucking Baise, who'd'a known?”

“Is the Batmare going to come too?” Serenity asked beside me. “I like her. She's cool an' heroic, and can teleport cool-like.”

“Yeah, kid.” Pinprick snorted. “But not with us. The train station is 'pparently on the south west side outside the city, but since this is the only fucking gate, we have to go 'round. Now the Batfuck is

different, she can just teleport past the walls, so she's already there an' staking the area out. She could'a taken me too, but I felt like talking to your cunt of a mother." Serenity seemed to approve of this information and nodded happily. "Now lets get the show on the fucking road. There's a whole caravan of us waitin', ya know. All the gangs that matter."

"How do you know who matters?" She'd been in the city for maybe a week at the most, so I doubted she had a real intricate view on how it was organized.

"The ones that do. Are coming." She laughed. "Bird bitch incoming." Huh, what. When I turned around it seemed Prick was right, as Flare landed behind me. "Told ya."

"Oh, she wormed her way in too?" Flare said, trotting up beside me, "I got the stuff by the way." I think that was his attempt at being subtle, but it didn't really work. "So, Pin. Ya get into a fight or something? If I had to guess, you offended someone and they kicked you for it."

"I'm guessing you bird brain fucks don't listen to the radio then, 'cause if ya did you'd know that me an' the bat bitch took down a serial killer in the slums." She spat at the thought. "He didn't touch me, but that fuck that the bat bitch keeps fighting showed up and turned things to shit. The joking stallion, or whatever."

"Him again?" I gave an exasperated sigh, and started towards the NCA outpost around the exit of Parasite Mound (what a stupid name). That was the pony who first posed me the question 'What is the nature of a hero', which proved he was crazy, strangely philosophical, and bad at phrasing questions. He gave me the first answer, too: failure.

"Yeah, the fuck with a metal faceplate and terrible fashion sense." She followed me as well, seemingly unconcerned it might clash with her 'disguise'. "I've never seen anypony predict the bat bitch like he could. Ya know her teleportation-fu, right? Fucker seemed to be able to guess where she'd appear. Guess when you and a cunt go at it night after night their fucking style gets memorized. I almost got him too, but he's a slippery bitch."

"I don't like him," Serenity stated. "He was mean. So I shot at him."

"The trick is to hit him." Spitshine pointed out. "I'll give you pointers. Hitting is *the* most important part." Pinprick's daughter trotted out from under her mother and over to Serenity. I was understandably a little bit nervous with Serenity making friends with a former raider filly.

"I know how'ta shoot. I killed a ghoul that was tryin'a eat momma once," Serenity replied a little bit haughtily. It was a bit surprising that she gave up that information so quickly because at the time she was really upset over it... but I guess since then we've been through Karkhoof, Timber, and the facility so she had worse things to dwell on.

"Oh! That's cool. What happened?" At Spitshine's proclamation Serenity lost her reservations and started to excitedly tell the story about the tunnels. Though it had a lot more over the top fights (I apparently hoof wrestled a hellhound ghoul) and much less subtle mind fuckery.

"I still don't get it." My eye shot over to Pinprick who seemed to be staring at my filly. "Why Silver Bullet wanted her so much." It took me to remember that Silver Bullet was the name of the slaver who gave me the job to kill Nanny Jane and take Serenity to him.

"Child slaves are worth a lot?" It was what I had always assumed.

Apparently Flare heard what I said so he took the opportunity to fly backwards in front of me and Prick. "Child slavery? Is this more of your secret past you don't tell anypony?"

"Eat shit, birdie." Pinprick was always the one for polite conversation. "Nah, I mean. Yeah they're worth a pretty cap, but not to the extent that cunt was going, he would have burned Bridle Hope to the

ground, and not all nice-like, like the Crimson Fuckers did neither.”

“Oh, I love mysteries.” Flare could not help but to flip himself upside down. I still didn't know how he did that. “I'm guessing you know some big secret, right right? Well, spill it.”

“Ugh, fucking birds. Can't stand them.” she looked back to me. “I know he was planning on a specific buyer, 'cause the fucks came in a few times, but I don't know who. Think they might have been birdies.” She sneered at Flare. “Whatever his reason, it was lost when you broke his brain. A fuckin' shame.” Yeah, I was real broken up about killing him. For the longest time he was the only pony I killed who I felt really deserved it.

“I'm sure it was nothing.” The broken hive of Parasite Mound retreated as we closed in on the NCA outpost at the outskirts of the town. There just on the other side of the outpost I could see a great throng of pony guards representing every faction. Even as we walked closer I could see more joining the crowd. If anything represented Dise, it was that great crowd of ponies. Just ponies though, and it wasn't like the land was devoid of other races. I'm not sure what it said about the city, or about me that I was joining them, but it couldn't have been a good thing.

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Though this was supposed to be a show of unity for Dise, as soon as the group started to move each of the gangs separated into their own separate marching columns. The only real unity we showed was that everyone agreed to glare at everyone else. It made the whole walk almost as tense as the infamous ‘most awkward vertibuck ride ever’.

It also made the walk long and slow. Because the train station was on the west side of Dise, we were forced to walk the long way around the city walls. It would have been frustrating but it allowed me to see the ruined city surrounding Dise in all it's... glory? Much of it was nothing more than rubble or buildings barely clinging onto their foundations. It looked all the more dilapidated compared to great grey walls of Dise standing tall behind the ruins. It was an interesting juxtaposition...

It was an interesting contrast.

As we walked, our route forced us down a cracked street in between large broken buildings on either side. There was a call from one of the NCA ponies in the front to be on our guard. The talking around me went quiet and it seemed like everypony around started to get tense. When I looked over at the buildings, I thought I saw shapes through broken windows and cracked stone; grey dirty things that moved quickly and quietly.

“Raiders. Or worse.” Flare said in a low voice. “Used to be bloodwings until the Enclave drove them out.” I wasn't sure what a bloodwing was, but I had a feeling it would be bad. One of the shapes in a second story window stopped and looked at me. It was a dark thing that barely looked like a pony at all. I carefully nudged Serenity behind me for protection, just in case. “They were driven out of Parasite Mound before I was born,” Flare explained about the raiders. “Some have been here longer. They have been so mutated by radiation and toxins they're barely ponies...”

Whatever the thing was that stared at me was, it didn't stare for long as it decided it wasn't worth the trouble. “Radiation?”

“You'll see. Keep your head down.” As soon as I did I could hear gunshots. The buildings made the noise echo though, so try as I might I couldn't find the source. There was a flurry of repeating blasts before the street went silent again.

That seemed like a good enough reason to keep my head down. Though I couldn't help but look for scurrying in the buildings, but there was nothing there for me to see. Whatever raiders were there

decided not to repeat the mistake of the pony that just shot at us, so they vanished back into urban jungle.

We were walking over a slight hill when everypony turned their head to stare at something. When I looked I was in awe, too. Less than half a kilometre away was a huge impact crater. At the centre of the crater was a pool of water that glowed with an eerily blueish green light. Part of me wondered if it was where the megaspell that killed Dise had fallen. Though it was strange, we were fairly close to it, but my pipbuck wasn't giving me a radiation warning.

"It's odd... that... thing emits a lot of radiation, like melt your face off levels, but it doesn't spread beyond it's little hole. Or at least not much," Flare said, staring at it. He flew above Dise many times so he must have been used to the sight. I'd no idea something like that was so close to the city. "Funny thing is that apparently the megaspell that hit Dise was an airburst. It shouldn't have left a crater."

"It don't look like the one in Eyeglow," Serenity said, also staring at it. "There's one there too, but it looks different, it was wider there, an' more green'n stuff. Not as deep." She paused. "At least, ah think. I ain't been there for'a long time, but from what I remember..." her voice trailed suddenly unsure.

"I heard once a meteorite hit the city..." Though I couldn't remember where I heard that. "And it got covered up as an attack."

"Huh?" Flare looked over at me with a raised eyebrow. "Now that's new. Ain't never heard anything about that. I guess it's not impossible, just unlikely. Whatever caused that, it plagued the ruins of Dise for years. The new city was built keeping in mind to stay as far away from the crater as possible while still incorporating the larger buildings that hadn't been destroyed."

"You're a wealth of knowledge today, Flare." Either he was trying to be helpful to make up for that whole falling off the waggon (or is it getting on the waggon?) thing, or he wanted to rub his knowledge in my face.

"What? Knowledge is power, Silver." He looked me over and smirked. "So you're screwed. And besides. It's fairly common knowledge, at least to us factions that actually teach our members. The Enclave takes great pride in teaching our foals, and history is important. Haze would be proud." He added quickly, "At least, she'd be proud of the parts the Remnants didn't greatly alter to their own benefits. If you listened to their teachings you'd believe the Caledonian and Equestrian pegasi almost won the war single-hoofedly."

Flare went on telling a few stories of ponies he knew that had actually ventured into the crater. Apparently one turned into a mass murdering maniac who tried to use a mega-spell to blow up Dise, while the other just sort of melted away. Of course it was Flare so it was safe to say that the stories were either greatly exaggerated or made up wholesale.

About an hour after we got around the crater, we finally made it to the NCA base. Looking at it from a distance, it looked more like a temple than a train station. Vines climbed up brown stone walls that made up the front of the building, worming their way around a large (broken) clock near the top before reaching the top of the wall that tapered off like a steeple. I could just see the ruins of the large multilevel staircase that lead to the main entrance. On each of the three levels were the ruins of what looked to be separate gardens, complete with fountains and statues.

As we got closer it only became more impressive because I realized just how large the building was. It was like an immense towering fortress looming over the weary landscape. It hurt my neck to look up at the top of the building as we made our way up the stairs.

"Who needs a train station this big?" I had to ask as we slowly made our way over ruined walkways and stairs so well used they were rounded and faded.

“Somepony with a small dick.” I gave Flare a withering glare so he would know that that sort of talk was inappropriate around my daughter.

Still, I had to guess. “Wallkirk?”

“Well it's called the 'Wallkirk Memorial Train Station', so that'd be a good guess.” Of course it was. It was something big and in Dise, so it had to be him. Sometimes I wondered why he didn't take his wealth and just make his own little country out of the city, but when I thought about it a bit more, I realized he sort of did. He could have at least done something right, if that was the case, instead of constantly failing in every endeavour I'd found out about. Never before had I heard of a stallion so full of ambition, yet so utterly incapable of following through.

“It's big,” Serenity stated, officially claiming the title of Captain Obvious.

“Thanks, sweetie, you're so observant.” She bopped me on the back of the head for that remark. Oh, did I mention she'd climbed onto my back during the walk? It happened so much it just seemed natural by then.

“Can you two be like... less sickeningly sweet? It can't be healthy.” The obvious response was to glare at Flare. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Serenity copying me.

As soon as we got to the top level of the building the different factions split off, but since Tight Lips and the rest of the Hizai went inside, I followed them. The interior of the building was even more impressive than the outside.

Looking up, I could see the high arched ceiling; it was made up almost entirely of glass-panes in a metal frame. Near the very top, I saw scaffolding and catwalks which seemed to suggest that the NCA was busy refurbishing the building. When I looked behind me, I saw a similar style of stone wall to the one I saw when entering the building (it even had a giant broken clock) but it was partially covered up on either side of the door by giant white screens that must have been new. In order to see the rest of the platform I had to walk around a crude wooden stage set up in the middle of the lobby.

I turned to face the other side of the stage and saw a large escalator system in the middle of the huge room. It was being guarded by multiple heavily armed NCA rangers so I didn't go that close, but from where I stood, the escalators seemed to go down multiple levels, even underground. This led to the feeling that the room was actually split into three parts from side to side. There was a large area on the left side that stopped when it reached the escalator pit, or rather the barrier put up so ponies wouldn't fall in. That led to the pit area which was really a series of escalators that went down several floors, before leading to the right floor area that was the same as the left only on the other side of the pit.

It seemed a bit needlessly complicated, but immensely useful in this occasion as delegates from both the NCA and Minotaurs were already getting set up, and the two groups were split up, the Minotaurs on the right side of the pit, and the NCA ponies on the left. It was a neat little solution that was much better than actually having the supposed peace agreement be announced with ponies and minotaurs actually intermingling. Celestia forbid.

My eyes were drawn over to the Minotaur side of the lobby, though. For some reason in my head Minotaurs were all homogenous, a large hoard of identical monsters rampaging across the land. Instead I saw something much different. Even though few minotaurs were waiting, and all seemed to be soldiers (Given they were wearing metal armour and brandishing spears and guns) they were as different from each other as I was from Flare. Some were tall, others short, a few were dulled out reds and browns and blues, but at least one was a bright yellow, and two were a deep pink. It sort of shattered my prejudice, or at the very least cracked it.

“Hired.” Huh, what? “Hiiiiired, Earth to Hired.” My eyes turned to Tight Lips who was waving with

one of her cybernetic hooves. “Ah, you're back in the world of the living. Not sure what I am going to do with you, as you're not part of Security. Oh, wait! I get to do nothing; turns out you're special because of your eye and Major General Hailstorm wants to speak with you personally about your job. Makes my work easier.” She waved over a NCA guard. “This lovely mare will escort you to the general. Play nice, and remember, whatever you do, you do as a representative of Mr. House.”

“Right this way,” The female guard said starting towards the left side of the lobby. “Your friends can come too, but the Major General will need to speak with you in private.”

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At the end of the long lobby, there was a smaller and less fancy series of doors that led to the first sign that this place was actually a train station. Out the back of the lobby was a large outdoor train platform where I assumed ponies used to wait for trains. On the left side was a train that looked like it hadn't moved since the end of the world, while on the left there were just empty tracks on a lower section. At least until you got to the end of the platform, where a few cars were left standing but seemed to have crashed violently, spilling partially onto the platform.

All along the platform NCA guards seemed on high alert as they patrolled the area. “Your friends need to wait here,” the mare who was leading us said.

“I wish I was as popular as Hired,” Flare nickered.

“Serenity.” I looked down at the small filly as she jumped off my back onto the floor. “Be good for Momma, and make sure Flare doesn't get shot.”

“Okay! I'm the best at getting ponies un-shot.” That didn't really make much sense but she said it with such unabashed confidence I could not help but agree.

“Alright,” I said after briefly mussing up Serenity's mane. “Lets go.” The guard smirked a little and led the way.

The car she took me to just happened to be at the very end of the really long platform on the left side. The car in question looked like it had been freshly painted blue, and above the door were the words 'Major General Hailstorm' in gold. My stomach twisted staring at the words, and I found myself stupidly nervous. I had met many of Dise's top brass to the point it was almost sort of silly, but it was this pony who made me the most nervous. Maybe it was because now I actually understood how the city worked, and how the NCA worked. Or maybe it was because this pony, as the top military commander of the NCA, had more ponies under her command than all of the other leaders I'd talked to put together.

The guard I was following showed no care for my existential crises and abruptly opened the door, making me scramble to follow her. “Hired Gun of the Hizai.” The guard said. The inside of the car seemed to have been cleared of seats and was carpeted in a dusty blue. The walls were painted a similar blue except for the occasional NCA crest. On the far end of the car were three ponies standing around a table.

One of them was General Scoitel who saw me and gave a short 'huzzah', while the other was Major Lucky who stared at me briefly with his pale eyes before mumbling something I couldn't hear to the pony I didn't recognize. The one I didn't recognize was a fairly large brown unicorn mare with her bright pink mane and tail both tied back in matching braids. She whispered something back to Major Lucky before finally looking over at me.

“Hired Gun of the Hizai, I have been waiting for you. Leave us, all of you, at once.” Her voice boomed through the car and at once the two high ranking NCA officers went for the exit.

“Don't fuck around with her, Hired,” Lucky said to me as he walked passed, while Scoitel just gave me a gentlestallionly nod.

That left me and the intimidatingly large brown mare alone in car. She gave me a hard glare before slowly cracking a smile. “You're actually larger than me. I can hardly believe it. Well, get over here; nopony is watching, and I can't abide by stuffy procedures. Would you like a drink?” She floated out a wine bottle and started to pour me a glass even though I didn't say anything. “The best thing about the apocalypse was that it made every bottle of wine a vintage.”

“Uh...” I stopped at the table but gave her a respectable distance. “Thank you, ma'am.”

“Ugh, don't ‘Ma'am’ me. I *hate* being ‘ma'am'd. It makes me feel old.” She sipped at her glass. “If anypony should be ‘ma'am'd, it's Major Lucky. He's as old as Celestia and naggy as a crone. Well, drink.” She stared at me hard enough that I took a drink. “Not what you were expecting, huh?” I looked the mare over. She wasn't that old, but I could see a few grey hairs in her pink mane, and wrinkles forming around her mouth and eyes. She looked strangely comfortable in what would normally be a very stuffy dress uniform. Though she seemed the type to be comfortable anyway.

“I didn't know what to expect...”

“I try to keep ponies off guard.” She looked over the table and flipped over something she didn't want me to see. “Enough about me, this is about you. House promised me a lookout, and I got you. You look like me in my prime, well, if I was a tad bit larger and with fewer body parts. Which is not saying much for your looking skills, as I could never be arsed. I preferred the front lines.” She grinned at me with an almost stunningly white smile. “Well, take the patch off, let me see it.”

My eye must have been getting used to the darkness because when I took it off everything on my right side was a mute colour. There was a slight whirring sound in my head as colour slowly returned, and the eye recognized I was looking at a mare. Immediately a purple indicator box was placed around the mare (which was the highest threat level) and the name Major General Hailstorm started to hover over her head. It was a little awkward to get used to (like every time I took my eye patch off) but I knew I'd get used to it again in short order.

“Impressive.” The General seemed to think it was okay to violate my personal space by bringing herself alarmingly close to stare at my eye. “Oh, I like it. What can it do?” I briefly explained the main functions. “Will it work if you're looking at a lot of ponies?”

“Uh, it has limited er...” the word escaped me for a second. “Processing power. Right, so maybe. If not it'll mark the ponies closest to the centre of my vision.” That seemed to be acceptable to her. “Why?”

“I need a lookout. Somepony that can pick out the most dangerous of those bipedal freaks in case this is just an excuse to get a lot of them close to us.” One time they poisoned tea during a peace meeting if Flare was correct (was he ever?) so her suspicion didn't seem entirely baseless, if still quite racist. “And House said you're the only one.”

Did I mention how odd I found that? Electronic eyes weren't the least common enhancement the Hizai had, and I wouldn't have been surprised if a few ponies voluntarily took them for the upgrades. So why then was I the only pony available. He had a whole security department, and there was no way none of them had cyber-eyes. There was just something wrong about the whole deal. As usual I got the feeling I was missing something vital.

“I guess so,” I said as calmly as my eyes scanned her office. For a remolded train car it actually looked almost professional. Of course in the wasteland not being covered in shit counted as professional.

“Right, good. Finish your wine, and no you can't have another...” She wandered off to get something

out of my view.

“Are you really the leader of the NCA Military?”

She turned and glowered at me like I was an idiot. “What exactly did you expect?” She scoffed. “Kill enough bipeds and they'll give you whatever office you want. When the last Major General bit the hay there was a vote among the military top brass. It's really the only fair way, before the chairpony used to pick the Major General, but he has no military knowledge,” she laughed. “Clear enough? Stop asking questions. ‘Lestia, some ponies don't know how to give respect,’” she muttered as she poured herself yet another drink.

“Sorry I...” I nervously took a sip of my wine. It was okay tasting, though a bit fruity. I'd take whiskey or Golden Harp any day of the week, but I seemed to be in shaky enough ground as it was so I shut the buck up. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The large unicorn walked over and placed a strange black device on the table in front of me. “Wear this. Short range communication device, it'll let you report what you see in real time. You'll be alone up there, it's right above the floor and high so it'd be of limited use as a sniper spot unless you can shoot straight down. “High up... my mind went back to those catwalks I saw over the lobby. Oh hell no. There was no way I was going up there. No way in hell I was going up there.”

“Uh... I-” Was cut off. That happened too much. It'd be easier if ponies just took turns speaking.

“It is good to know House remains such a... close friend to the NCA.” She filled up my cup. “Hate to have anything jeopardize that.” I made a mental note that Major General Hailstorm was good at reading facial expressions. “Have a drink, and then I'll have someone show you where to go.” She waved for me to finish my drink which I dutifully did. “I'll ask you go alone, none of your fellows or what have you. The Catwalks are old, and you look heavy enough...” Oh, and they were easily breakable. This was going to be fun.

I turned and walked out of the room and ran straight into my waiting friends who all but forced me to tell them my job. Which I did, with only a little annoyance.

“Aren't you scared shitless of heights?” Thank you, Flare, for your brilliant and annoying commentary. “Is this a good idea?”

“About as good as sending you on a diplomatic mission.” That was a witty retort right? I had been practising. “Good or not, House expects me to. So I need to.” Just had to not look down... while also looking down and scanning the area for the most dangerous minotaurs. This really only left one option.

“Will ya be okay, Momma?” Just fine and dandy. “Don't worry, we'll be right there with you.”

“Uh, actually...” I explained to them that it was not really possible, or a good idea, for them to come with me. Well, I guess they could, as they were both light, but I didn't really want Serenity that high up if it was so sketchy, and if she wasn't going Flare would need to be with her. Just because I had to do something stupidly dangerous for my job didn't mean I was going to let Serenity come with me. “Don't worry. I'll be fine,” I said, not really believing it myself.

“Well, from what I've heard, there's a spot in the back for non-military to watch the speech, so I'll be there in case you fall.” I raised my eyebrow because the thought of Flare catching me seemed unlikely. Until I remembered he'd actually done it once, though he had some trouble then. It would have to do for a backup, but it didn't fill me with confidence.

“Thanks...” I said. The guard who was leading us looked back and sped up her pace down the train platform. “Once we get back Flare... we really need to do that... thing...” I didn't really want to, if I had to be honest, because Med-X did help, and I needed all the help I could get. On the other hoof I didn't

want to scare Serenity or push away Haze, so I guess... I'd just see how the detox went.

“Yeah, we'll reschedule.” He rolled his eyes.

“I'm serious.” Well, mostly serious. He must have sensed that because he stuck his tongue out at me as we entered the building again.

“What're ya two talkin' about?” Serenity gave us both very suspicious looks. “Somethin' secret? Bet I know what it is. Ah'm very intuitive like that.” I'm sure she was, and it wouldn't have surprised me if she knew, but I didn't really want to talk about it with her, so I stared disinterestedly at the marble-tiled floor. “Well?” She was impatiently waiting for a response. “I won't tell ya what I know then, if ya gunna be that way.”

“I already know what you know.” I said back as the guard led us through the fairly tight group of NCA Soldier set up to watch the speech.

“I know that ya know that ah know.”

“I know you know I know you know I know... wait...” I scrunched my face up. “What?”

“I knew you'd say that.” Flare smirked as we reached a small door in the side of the wall near one of the rooms many large windows.

I looked up nervously to see that high above me a catwalk extended from an unseen door and went across the top of the room before it attached to the walkway that went down the length of the building. “Up here,” the guard said, looking at me. “Keep the headset on.” I wished he didn't have to remind me about it, because it was annoyingly uncomfortable. “And keep in touch. Don't forget you can turn the mic off with a button the side. Might be difficult for an earth pony as it was designed for unicorns, but whatever.”

She opened the door revealing a very skinny room filled completely with an old metal staircase that was definitely not up to safety standards. “Have fun.” The guard chuckled and walked away leaving the three of us there.

“Hired...” Flare said uncharacteristically softly. “Are you going to be okay? I mean... uh...” I carefully looked over at him, trying my best not to look completely terrified. “Just... you'll be fine. I'll be watching. Just fine.” Just hanging way too high in the air (in a stupidly large room) on a catwalk that was stated to probably not be able to hold me. Oh yeah, just fine. It didn't make my chest tighten and heart race or anything.

Something small pressed up against my leg, and when I looked down I saw Serenity hugging it. “Don't worry mommy, I'll catch you.” She said as a pale pink glow engulfed her horn. I couldn't help but smile, and I felt some of the pressure in my chest loosen, but not nearly enough to make me comfortable.

“Thanks.” I wrapped my metallic leg around her. “I'm not scared.”

“Whatever you say, Momma,” she said with one of her brightest smiles. “Seeya later.” She took a step back with Flare, letting me enter into the room and close the door.

In the silence of the room I could hear the subtle sound of stairs creaking, and groaning. This did nothing for my growing anxiety but make it worse. I could do this though. I had been higher before (the most awkward vertibuck ride ever came to mind) and I had fallen farther (The time I jumped... okay, not thinking about that would be a good idea) so this would be a cake walk. I was built like a tank after all, so what did I have to fear?

Heights.

Right, almost forgot. I was very thankful Flare went 'medicine' shopping earlier because at that moment I needed a Med-X just to get onto the first step. It melted some of my worry away, enough to get my legs functioning again. You see it wasn't strictly heights that scared me, it was falling. And when the chance of falling increased, the fear associated also did. It was like math, but with my fragile mental state.

Slowly, and I do mean very slowly, I managed to climb the staircase. It was a long, treacherous climb, and every time I heard a creak or a groan I had to take a break to stop my heart from leaping into my throat. At the top was a sturdy stone landing with a simple door leading to the catwalk. I was very, very grateful that it was closed. It was one thing to be high up in an elevator or hotel room, and quite another to be on rickety platforms where you can see how far you will fall if anything at all happens.

My leg started to shake a little, so I took a brief moment to rest on the platform and catch my breath. It wasn't much further now. It wouldn't be so hard. Just walk onto something that could break if I sneezed too hard. Why did I have to be a huge bucking pony? This would be much easier on my brain if I was Flare-sized. Then I took a second Med-X and injected that too. It made my head a little woozy, but helped with the anxiety.

It helped a lot less when I opened the door and looked out onto the catwalk. It was a thin strip of metal (Whoever chose grating you could see through instead of solid metal was forever on my shit list) hanging way too high up over the lobby and apparently kept up by thin strips of metal wire hanging from the ceiling. All in all I was not impressed with its structural integrity, and completely flipping my shit.

I had to stand on that. With my hooves. Above... with only that to keep me.. how was I going... I... ugh.

I slammed my head into the door frame but all that did was made my head hurt worse than it already did. How was I going to do that. It wasn't... ponies who weren't afraid of heights wouldn't have even walked on that. It was insane, and stupid, and just.

Alright. I pulled out my third Med-X. It was the only way I was going to get on there (though more likely I'd overdose and die, but it'd mean not walking on that catwalk). The needle pierced my skin, and I felt a slow and familiar rush of euphoria. Only. Something felt off.

My head started to spin, and the world seemed to dance around me. Things moved that shouldn't have, or maybe that was just my head moving. My legs (even my cybernetic one) felt like jelly under me, and before I could do anything they gave way and I was lying face first on the floor. The cold floor. It was like someone took a cloud and parked it in my brain. Then there was darkness as my heavy eyelids fell over my eyes. That was okay though. It was a comforting darkness.

This was going to be awkward to explain.

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“Go get Mother,” Meadow said to me harshly.

I didn't at first, I was almost too scared. Everything seemed to happen so quickly. First I was running around playing with my brother, and then I found a strange box of weird blue bullets. That was all good, until a pony named 'Smooth Tongue' showed up wanting them and suddenly everything was tense and weird. My brother seemed to be guarding the box for whatever reason, and a few nearby ponies were shouting things, which is when he started barking orders at me. I wasn't really one to argue with the older brother (even if he was smaller than me).

The olive stallion smiled at me as I tried to get around him and his weird friends. “Yes, go get her. The mayor should be here.” I didn't like the fact this pony seemed to know Mommy, so I stuck my tongue

out at him and started to run back towards the main Marefort building. Since our house was right beside the entrance to the warehouse it didn't take that long.

Since Mommy was the mayor we got one of the biggest houses in town with two whole rooms! I found her in the second room where she kept all her weird books and stuff. Mommy was the prettiest pony there ever was, even when doing boring stuff like reading, and she always had time for me. As soon as I ran in she looked up at me and set her book down. "Hello sweetie, what is it?"

"I was helpin' with the thing over at the place there in the building and I found this box of bluey bullets and this bad guy came up all evil-like, and Meadow said I should get you, so here I am getting you." I took a deep breath. "It seemed important."

"'Evil-like,' dear?" She smiled ever so sweetly at me. "What did he look like?"

"Oh, he had evil eyes! An a weird green coat, and a long grey mane." Her expression changed instantly to one I didn't understand.

"No, it's too soon." She quickly put the book into her bookshelf (it had a black cover with weird white dots all over it) and started to the door. "Stay here, please. Don't leave this room."

She quickly hurried out, leaving me alone in the room and very confused. Mommy usually let me go with her if I wanted to, and she never was this worried. There wasn't much for me to do though so I walked around in a circle until that got boring. I wanted to be a big pony. In my mind I was sure mommy was going to go teach that mean pony a thing or two, and I could help. Even though I was still young, I was big and strong and could totally beat him up. If only Mommy let me.

With a little huff I trotted over to her bookshelf and marvelled. She had over twenty books, that was more than the rest of Marefort combined! Mommy was a really smart pony, a lot smarter than I would ever be, she could read and think and do all sorts of cool stuff. Sometimes she read to me, but never with these books, because she knew I wouldn't understand. Still, I was curious as to what she was reading about.

So I took the weird black book off her shelf and laid it on the ground. I flipped though the book (I was careful to do it carefully and not leave any hoof smudges) and noticed it not only had words but cool pictures. Mostly the pictures were of strange coloured rocks, but I saw at least one silvery looking sword (It was so cool) and some strange looking armour. It wasn't until I was halfway through the book I saw them. The blue bullets.

I was shocked. Mommy was reading about the bullets just at the same time I found some? This had to mean something special. The others had to know about this book, because maybe it was important and would stop whatever was going on. But to do that I would have to go against Mommy....

I figured this was far more important than staying here on Mommy's order, so I took the book onto my back, and left our house. Since the entrance to Marefort was literally right outside my door, it didn't take me long to leave the warehouse and look towards the west building.

That's when I saw the commotion. There had been a lot of ponies scavenging there before, but it was just crazy how many were there. Vaguely I could hear shouts, and big ponies talking. Probably about the bullets I found. I could stop it though, because I had the book. Finally I was going to be a big pony, and do something right. Hopefully I could get to beat up evil eyes too.

So I ran towards the crowd.

When I got there it was so noisy that I couldn't make out what anypony was saying. "Hey." I tried prodding somepony in the back of the crowd. "Hey, I needa get through. I have the book." the ponies didn't listen though, and the crowd just seemed to push me back out when I tried to force my way

through. "HEY!" I tried yelling but that didn't work either. Maybe it was because every pony around was talking too. It was annoying and hectic, and if they'd only listen I could solve it.

Gritting my teeth I tried to make myself as small as possible and squeeze into the mass of ponies. It was a success! I managed to get into the crowd, but it was still hard to get forward, and especially without getting stepped on. Thankfully I managed to keep the book balanced, but it almost fell off a few times. That's when I heard the strangest thing.

BANG.

I had been in Marefort long enough to know what that was! Without even caring about the book I forced myself through the ponies blocking my way with surprising ease. Either they finally realized I was there, or were so shocked they stopped moving. It must have been the second because the crowd quieted down too, and all I could hear was the sound of somepony crying.

When I emerged from between some ponies legs I saw Cakewalk first. She was crying over something, and it took me a second to realize what. It was her father, old Forest Fire, he was on the ground and surrounded by a red puddle. Wait... that was... blood? Someone shot him? But why? He could barely walk. What was going...

"Silver, no!" My eyes shot over to where my mommy was sitting. Her eyes were welling with tears and I was so happy to see she wasn't shot too. "Don't, you need to leave!"

"Mommy, wha-" The olive pony behind her smacked her hard with a pistol. "NO! Don't hurt Mommy!" I tried to tell them about the book, but the words caught in my throat. The only thing I was capable of saying as the evil pony lifted the gun up to her was no.

So I charged at them. I could do it. I had to save mommy. She was mine and I wouldn't let anypony hurt her. Tears stung my eyes, but I kept running at them, I had to stop them, I had to-

BANG

Something slammed into my chest causing me to stumble and fall. There was a fire in my chest like nothing I had ever felt, and all my energy was sapped from me. The world around me started to fade to black, and the noise started to fade. I could see them, the olive pony, and mommy. "No..." I whispered and reached a hoof out to them., When I couldn't reached I slammed it into the ground and pulled my limp body forward. "No..." my eyes started to close as the fire intensified. "No..." my eyes sprang open, I couldn't sleep. Not now. I could stop them. I could...

BANG

A hole in mommy's neck suddenly appeared in a bright red spray. Mommy fell to the ground, her lilac eyes staring at me as I tried to crawl to her. It wasn't too late. I could still save her. "No..." I whispered as the last of my strength left me and my eyes closed on their own. I failed. Mommy she was... she saw me try to save her, and I couldn't... if only they had the book...

"No..."

---

"Hired Gun!" My eyes shot open.

"Mommy?" I said blearily not really sure where I was. There were stone walls, a staircase, some sort of walkway... oh, yeah. Back at the train station. I had the job... "Ugh." My brain felt cloudy and throbbed in annoyance. Maybe three Med-X was too much. "I'm here... I'm..."

"Hired, turn your damn mic on." Right. Right. Slowly and with shaking limbs I got back on all fours and pressed the button on my head set.

"I'm here, sorry." My tongue felt heavy, and the words seemed slurred. Hopefully it would wear off.

"You better be." The voice was the major general's. "Get on there and report, the speech is about to start in ten minutes." Ten minutes? Just how long had I been out?

Stupidly I tried to nod in reply, but then I remembered she couldn't actually see me. "Yes ma'am." I stumbled onto the catwalk. The creaking sound it made when I first stepped on was enough to snap me back into reality. I gasped a little and felt my stomach fall into my throat when I looked down and saw ponies far far below me. Who needs such a high roof? It served no purpose except to look cool and frighten me.

Still I had a job to do, so against my better judgement I took another step forward onto the rickety metal grating. A few steps later and it was still frightening, but my limbs had loosened up enough that I could walk properly. Part of me really wanted to take another Med-X, but the rest of me was positive that would be a bad idea.

When I got to the crossroad where the catwalk running across the room and the one running down the length of it intersected, I stopped and took a look around. From the looks of it, everypony (and minotaur) who was ready for the speech was already there. The right side was filled to the brim with soldier-looking NCA ponies, while the left was slightly less full, but still contained a sizable number of minotaurs. It must have been strange for them being in a building designed for four-legged creatures.

The catwalk I was standing on was directly over the stair pit in the middle of the room, and looking down made the ground seem even further away, which did nothing for my anxiety. At the very bottom though, I thought I could see the remains of more train tracks. Maybe an underground train system? Or something.

"Hired, are you there? Report."

"Here, here." I replied walking across the walkway so I was directly above the minotaur side. My eyes slowly adjusted to the strange creatures and thin multicoloured icons started appearing. "Near the front." I said into the mic. "A purple minotaur with the weird hat, he's a high level threat."

"That's their king." The static-y voice said into my ear, "and that's a crown, but it's good to know it is working." Oh, right. I made a mental note to watch him in case anything went wrong because Mayhem told me to protect him.

"Okay..." My eyes scanned the small semi-circle of minotaurs guarding the king. "His guards are low... except the one directly behind him. Another high. The brown one." Just then I saw a trio of ponies start to climb the stage in the front of the lobby. They were too far away to see properly, but my eye labelled one as 'Major Lucky', the second as 'General Scoitel' and the third unlabelled so it must have been a pony I never met.

"We are gathered here today to mark a momentous occasion." A gravelly voice (Lucky's) said over the speaker. "After years of strife and tension between our people we have finally achieved peace." There was a round of applause that sounded strangely forced, and died quicker than it started. "The Chairpony of the NCA is here to make the official announcement, but due to security concerns his speech will broadcast over a live feed."

"Green minotaur in the back." I whispered and listened to the speech at the same time. I'm a multitasker, apparently. "And the other green one beside him, both are high threats."

"How do they seem? Tense?" The Major General asked over my headset.

"Calm." That was true enough. All the ones I could see seemed to be leaning lazily on their spears, or standing quietly, but none looked ready to fight. "This all might be for nothing." Just as I spoke the two

giant screens beside the stage flickered, and came to life. On them was, I assumed, the chairpony of the NCA. He was a surprisingly young (if plump) light grey stallion with a short cropped bronze mane. His eyes seemed focused, and his mouth as tight and serious.

*“Fillies and Gentlecolts, Bulls and Cows. It is my great honour to speak with you all today.”* The Stallion's face was stiff as he spoke. *“The war between us has gone on far too long, and we can no longer fight pointless battle after pointless battle. We can not go the way of the Zebras and Ponies before the war to destroy ourselves instead of make peace, and for this reason the NCA council of cities, and the Minotaur Royal Court, has agreed t-t-t-t-t-oooooOooooooooooooo.”* The picture stuttered and started skipping, and for a second thought I saw something red on the screen.

“Uh.” Major lucky tapped his microphone. “We seem to be experiencing a minor technical difficulty. We're dispatching some technicians to look into it if you'll all please be patient.” My shoulder suddenly stung, and when I winced and held it I could have sworn I saw something flying above the glass ceiling. A pegasus, maybe.

“Hired, the minotaurs, are any hostile.” I snapped out of the pain, and ignored the height long enough to look down at them. They seemed calm, if a bit confused, and my EFS had them all non-hostile.

“All non-hostile. “I reported as the screen started to come back. “Everything is goo-” my voice trailed off as I saw who was staring over the lobby from the screen.

The pony had a murky red coat under a heavy application of white face paint, and even with the face paint it was easy to see half of his face was cybernetic. *“Hello lovelies!”* You had to be kidding me. *“I'm The Laughing Stallion, and if you haven't heard of me, well then you really haven't been listening to the news!”*

“Everyone stay calm!” Lucky screamed into the microphone, “Nopony move, everyone just... stay put. We will handle this situation, but we need everyone to stay put!”

“WHAT THE HELL! Someone find that stallion, find him and kill him now.” As the voice yelled in my ear I looked down below and saw a squadron of ponies break off from the crowd and head down the stairs.

*“Now, I bet you're all wondering what I called you here for.”* He snickered and then giggled. *“Oh wait, you're not here for me! You're here for... him.”* he shoved the camera roughly to the side where the NCA Chairpony was tied up, gagged and struggling. *“Seriously, pre-recording a speech and pretending it's live? That's evil even by my standards.”*

He may have been a joke of a pony, but this was serious. My eyes shot down to the minotaurs below and I noticed that the King's bodyguards had created a circle around him, and all were hefting their spears up. They looked tense, but none of them were noticeably hostile yet. Whatever was happening it didn't look like they planned it.

“I want his head ten minutes ago!” The voice in my ear screamed.

“Yes ma'am.” A second voice said.

“Hired, don't move. Keep an eye out. If any of those bipedal bastards make a move send them to hell.” I gulped and gave a quiet affirmative. It wasn't really something I could do under Mayhem's orders, so I really hoped I could just give warning shots, and that they'd listen.

This had gone so wrong so quickly. The NCA Security were running around like chickens with their heads cut off, and the guards from the gangs just stood dumbfounded and staring at the screen. There was no way that fool could have done this much by himself. The entire lobby below me had went from peaceful to enough tension they were about to break in five seconds.

And then it got worse.

The catwalk underneath me started to groan and shake, but I hadn't moved. Wait, that meant... My head snapped towards the nearest door only for my eyes to catch sight of something rolling towards me. It was too late to run away, and suddenly my world was filled with a stinging green light.

*Warning System Malfunction*

Red words appearing in my vision was bad right? Yeah that was bad.

*Critical Error, System Shutdown*

My eye flashed a few more errors, distorted my vision, and finally shut off. Whatever just hit me it was like my spark pulse emitter but in grenade form. "The fuck." I muttered and tried to take a step forward only for my cyber leg not to budge sending me face first into the grating. The whole walkway shook uneasily, and I heard the sound of cracking somewhere. "Is going..." I looked up and saw him. "On..."

*"I bet you're all wondering what I'm doing."* The Laughing Stallion said as the stallion looked down at me with a self-satisfied smirk. *"I'm just here to talk."* The purple stallion just shook his head at me, and pushed his long green mane out of his eyes. *"But I bet even now ponies with guns are coming to kill me. Oh how scared I am."*

"It's been a while." The stallion above me said.

"Not long enough, Dragonslayer." I should have known he'd be involved. The last time I met the Laughing Stallion he mentioned working with 'Dragon'. I should have put the pieces together. Realized who I would be dealing with. "Been busy?" It was basically required for me to ask a stupid question.

"Stealing the Chairpony of the NCA out from under their noses does take a certain amount of preparation." He pointed his rifle down at me. "I'm surprised to find you here. You're supposed to be dead." His golden eyes flashed with amusement.

"Yeah." I struggled to my feet, and fumbled for Subtlety, but he was faster. His bullet missed me, but I heard it crack against my battle saddle. Still, I had to try. my teeth clenched against the firing bit and... nothing. No bullets. Whatever he shot broke my saddle. Fuck. My gun was broken, my leg useless, the only thing i could hope to do was stall him, and I knew how ponies loved to lecture me. "You tried to kill me, but here I am. To stop you." That wasn't why I was there, but who cares about facts.

"Really?" He looked over the the screens where The Laughing Stallion was still ranting, and below him where the ponies and Minotaurs were growing even more tense. "Good job. You really think you're important, don't you?" I just glared in response hoping I could stall for long enough for my cybernetics to start working again. "You have no idea what's going on." I had a few ideas. "You were important once, but you're not anymore. Now you're just another deluded fool trying to survive in a city actively trying to kill you."

"Fuck you." Keep talking you arrogant bastard. He had to, I needed the time.

*"What I am here to tell you, my lovelies, is that the war is not over."* Even though I was not looking at the screen, I could still hear that crazy stallion over the speakers. *"Oh no, not at all, because you see, nopony wants it to be."*

"Don't you ever wonder why I wanted Karkhoof to get into that battle?" All the damn time. "You idiot." And he said nothing more about it. Helpful bastard.

"What?" I tried to move forward, but had to drag my metal leg. "You're trying to... get the city to fight? That's it right? You're begging for a war!" Why else would he go to these lengths to break up the peace

meeting, conference, speech thing. “Why? Who cares? The city has always fought.” There was no way he was alone though. He had to be working with someone, something, to pull this off.

He must have been working for a gang. One of the more ambitious gangs that was tired of the constant infighting. It was the only option that made sense. Have everypony fight and let his own gang pick up the ashes and take un-paralleled control of the city. Maybe re-igniting the war between the NCA and minotaur was a way to remove the dangerous NCA influence? That was it!

He had to be working for the Steel Rangers. They were forever hampered by their inability to fight the NCA, so by taking them out of the equation they could better control the fractured city. Especially if they got everyone else fighting too. Taking control of the pre-war technology stash was clearly the first step of their plan.

“I can see you think you've figured it out.” He just shook his head. “You haven't, trust me. I'm not an idiot, Hired, not like you.” He walked towards me. “For example, only an idiot would fight you one on one and expect to win. So I took out your cybernetics, and now you can't fight me. Easy. So trust me when I say anything you think you know is wrong, I'm just fucking with you before I kill you.” What an arrogant little git.

He talked and talked. Not to me though, but past me, as if I wasn't worth of his words. I realized that he wasn't even looking at me. I loved it when ponies weren't paying attention!

CRACK

“What the-” my pipbuck slammed into his skull. He tried to scream as he stumbled to the side, but I kicked him again with my working leg. The only problem was the force was hard enough to send me stumbling and limping, which gave him enough time to back up.

Shit. I looked around for some sort of advantage. I couldn't let him get the upper hand again. That's when I saw his rifle on the ground. he must have dropped it when I started kicking him. Without a second thought, I kicked at it, sending it sliding through the railings and onto the ground far below us.

“Not bad...” Blood was flowing down that bastard's face. “Not bad at all.” He shook his head and pointed at the screens. “But it's too late to stop this. Take a look.” My curiosity was overwhelming so I turned my head to the screen.

The Laughing Stallion had the Chairpony of the NCA by the back of his head and was choking him with a crowbar. “*What? Can't find me? Can't shoot me? Too bad, because I'm ending this now! Ginger!*” He smirked as he dropped his improvised weapon to the floor. “*Get in here.*”

A giant brown minotaur walked into view and the whole building gasped. The beast grabbed the chairpony up by the mane and pointed a gun in his face. Even at the face of death he had the courage to spit at the creatures face. “*We'll kill you all... every one... you fucking bastards.*”

The minotaur grimaced and then glared, and it was then I realized I recognized him. It was the Minotaur the Watchers employed, but why here, why now? “*For Discord.*” Ginger grunted, and started to squeeze the trigger. Before it could go off a purple flash blinded the camera.

BANG

“Fear not!” Suddenly the Batmare was there delivering a kick and a monologue at the same time. “I am here to rescue you!” With a flurry of flashes and kicks the minotaur nearly thrice the Batmare's size was beaten back.

I looked over and saw Dragonslayer standing there looking shocked at the screen. It was the perfect time to strike. I limped forward and swung my good hoof in an unbalanced arc. He was too quick though. My hoof just scraped his head. He started to back up so I had to put my hoof back on the

ground and force myself forward. I could beat him. Gunless, and legless, I could do it.

When I got close he suddenly turned. I reacted to the buck before I saw it, and threw my whole body painfully into the guardrails. My ribs flared with pain, but I had the advantage. Before he could bring his legs back, I tackled them. He fell with a hard thud. We wrestled for a few seconds before I had him pinned by his neck, but he was struggling and kicking, and I couldn't fucking finish it.

I grunted and tried to stop him from squirming. "Fuck you." He kept moving so I pressed my knee onto his neck. "Stay still." He didn't though. His wormy lips moved as if trying to say something, but all he could do was spit bubbles of blood.

*"Your reign is at an end!"* I looked up and saw The Batmare delivering a powerful kick to the nose of Ginger sending him stumbling back as blood ran down his face. *"You could never win!"* With a kick to the back of the head the great creature bent over, and finally with a teleport enhanced knee to the face, Ginger fell to the ground grunting in pain. The creature had blood matted to its brown fur, as it writhed in agony. *"Good always wi-"*

BANG

The Batmare dropped to the ground as blood stained the leg of her outfit. "Oh shut it." The Laughing Stallion walked into view. "You want a fight." The gun clanged to the floor. "Fight me." Even in pain the Batmare didn't fail to deliver. She quickly vanished from sight, and reappeared mid-kick behind that bastard of a villain.

Only for The Laughing Stallion to duck.

The Batmare was caught off guard but managed to recover with a devastating uppercut... which also missed. She blinked, and blinked again, but each move was deftly dodged by the pony in white face. The Batmare reappeared across the room (in the corner of the camera's view making it hard to see) staring at the stallion with a confused look on her face, but that quickly morphed into annoyance. She muttered something I couldn't hear and blinked again.

CRACK

Only for the laughing stallion to pick a crowbar off the ground and almost lazily slamming it into the Batmare's chest sending her flying out of screen. *"You're just delaying."* There were no jokes on The Laughing Stallions lips as he walked off screen. Never before have I seen a pony so ready to kill somepony.

"Fuck..." I whispered to myself. Before I could say anything more I felt my shoulder burn. My eyes fell to Dragonslayer's horn, and I followed its magic to notice he was pulling at one of the cords holding the catwalk up... oh shit.

The cable snapped and the platform lurched uneasily to the side. Giving me full view of the ground below me. Then I started sliding towards it...

Shit shit shit, falling is bad.

The movement sent me rolling off Dragonslayer and nearly to my death if I hadn't caught myself at the last second. My heart was racing so hard I had stop and calm myself, and I completely lost track of Dragonslayer. At that moment the only thought I could think was 'falling is bad!'

"Goodbye, Hired." Oh, he was standing above me. With a pistol in his mouth.

BANG

Both of us turned our heads to the screen to see a massively injured Ginger kneeling over the body of the NCA Chairpony. A smoking gun was in her hand, but the bullet missed. He lifted his hand again,

and tried to aim through the pain, but it kept shaking. He had to put his other hand on the gun to steady it. He fired a single shot.

BANG

The Minotaur laughed to himself in triumph. The NCA Chairpony was splattered against the floor by a Minotaur as hundreds of ponies and minotaurs watched on. There would be no peace after this, no hope for reconciliation.

“E-everybody!” Lucky screamed over the loudspeaker. It was too late though, already I could hear shots being fired below me. “Stay calm there must be an explanati-” A spear flew from somewhere in the minotaur side of the lobby.

Everyone not already shooting gasped as the ghoulish stumpled back and sat down. His eyes fell to the spear protruding from his chest. It looked like he was speaking, but he was too far away from the microphone and the words were lost. The two ponies beside him rushed to help, and maybe he would survive, but it was too late to stop it.

Bullets flew like hail from the NCA side and I could hear the shouts and cries of minotaurs as they died in blood and pain. Some ran forward to the guardrail for some measure of cover, while others retreated back looking for something else to hide from, but all of them threw their spears in return before switching to rifles, and heavy looking machine guns.

“So much for peace.” Dragonslayer quipped as my ears boiled with rage. It couldn't be like this. There must have been something I could do. Anything. I did the only thing I could do and charged. It was a un-steady uneasy gait with my powered down leg, but I hit him all the same.

The purple stallion was pushed back, grunting in pain. I saw his pistol fall from his grip, and I kicked it off the edge, like I'd done to his rifle. The distraction was all he needed though, because when I looked back at him, his horn was glowing.

Something tugged at my leg hard. My balance was thrown and my face slammed into the grating so hard it cracked.

There was another burst of magic, and the sound of a cable snapping. Then I started to slide. As my hooves scrambled for something to grab onto I looked behind me. Whatever he did, it snapped the catwalk in half, and the side I was on was tilting heavily to the floor. Panic filled me as the edge slowly came closer.

My heart jumped into my throat and my hooves flailed about trying to stop my descent. this was not how I wanted to die! Damnit! I needed Flare, or Platinum Haze, or... or wings or anything!

My leg snagged onto the guardrail just as my hind legs went over the edge. My leg tightened around it, and I held on with all my might. My hind legs kicked out uselessly from where they hung over the edge, but I couldn't get myself back up. With a slow gulp I looked down. I could only bear to look for a second, but it seemed like the minotaurs were retreating down the stairs. At the same time I noticed a pony running across the lobby towards the stairs to the catwalk...

I couldn't tell who it was, because just then The Batmare fell back into screen. Her mask was torn in half, but her face was covered with blood. She tried her best to stand, but her knees shook and she fell into a growing puddle of blood. “Pathetic.” The Laughing Stallion sauntered into view seemingly unhurt. There was a spark of anger as he saw her horn start to light up.

CRACK

The crowbar slammed into it, and the Batmare wailed in pain. The glow didn't stop though, despite it all. Barely over the speakers I heard he speak, “No... *I will...*”



blade cut across his face leaving a trail of blood on his already bloody muzzle. I saw him step back and heard a sharp gasp. "I'd rather die than let that cunt die. So fuck your offer, I'm not running until you're radhog food!" Her blade dug into Dragonslayer's shoulder. "She saved me! I won't let her die!" I could just barely see her leg twist, but I definitely heard Dragon slayer cry out.

He kicked at her and she backed up taking her knife with her. He tried to charge her, but was forced to back off as her leg-blade came dangerously close to his face. "She saved me! That cunt has a daughter. Like mine. And you expect me to leave her! Fucking dumb asshat!"

The sound of The Laughing Stallion's insane cackling filled the room.

"If you want to live," he said through gritted teeth as Pinprick stabbed at him, "I could save you." He brought his leg into the path of the blade, and it dug in so deep it protruded from the other side. "But..." He grunted in pain as his horn started to glow. "You don't!" His magic wrapped around Pinprick's dagger.

"WATCH OUT!" I screamed uselessly.

The blade was pulled free of the sheath and slammed into Pinprick's neck. Her eyes dilated, and she stopped moving. For a second it looked like she was trying to say something. Instead blood spewed from her mouth and ran down her chin. She gave one last shudder before falling limply into the railing with the bloody dagger still in her neck.

Tears stung my eyes. She couldn't be dead. She had a daughter. She couldn't. Not again, I couldn't let another mother die.

It was too late, it was always too late. Dragonslayer tore the blade out of his leg and threw Pinprick's lifeless body over the railing as he ran for the exit. My mind felt blank as I saw her corpse tumble down and land with a dull thud.

It couldn't be, she couldn't... she died and I couldn't help her. All I could do was hang there trying not to fall as she was killed. I saved her, then I let her die.

..I was alone on the catwalk, still dangling uselessly as better ponies were killed. Tears were streaming down my face when I heard it. The question. My eyes turned back to the giant screens still playing despite the fact it was only I who was still watching.

"*What is the nature of a hero!*" The laughing stallion said. Even with my blurry vision I could see flashes of green come out of his mouth as he spoke. "*What is the... oh Celestia, I get it. I get.*" He hunched over. Cracks started to form on his suit. Small at first, but they grew until the suit was shredded by the green light bursting from a hundred points of his body at once. "*What... what is... is the nature of a... hero.*" Whatever Dragonslayer did when he pressed that button was bad. The burning sensation that washed over my shoulder as he started to break apart and glow confirmed what I already knew. What he was, what he was doing.

He was a pony-megaspell. Like Simple Heart. Only this time, whoever did this to him didn't mess up. They wanted to create a concealable living bomb. They succeeded.

And he was about to go off.

We were all going to die...

But then I saw her. Off on the corner of the screen the Batmare crawling over to him with all her energy. "*The nature...*" she wrapped a leg around his neck and ignored the green energy coming from it. "*Of a hero?*" She wrapped another one as her broken horn started to light up. Her mouth moved, but she spoke so quietly I couldn't hear the words.

Then they both vanished in a brilliant purple light.

My eyes shot upwards, past the glass ceiling, and into the sky. For a second I thought I saw a purple flash, but it was overtaken. A great blast of green energy exploded. In a second the idyllic blue sky became a balefireic hellstorm.

BOOM

The sound and shockwave.

Glass shattered all around me and fell over the train station like rain. There weren't many ponies left though. Most were dead, dying, or deserted. But those that were stopped to watch the green light despite the glass shards.

As I hung there unable to help anypony, unable to save anypony, I pondered the first and last question the Laughing Stallion asked. 'What is the nature of a hero?'. As radiation fell over us like a blanket, sending my pipbuck ticking, I realized that he was always right. The nature of the hero was exactly what The Laughing Stallion said it was.

Failure.

Level Up!

Quest Perk: Freedom in Failure: Without enough support in the city of Dise, Batmare and her organization have fallen to the Forces of Chaos. You get +10 speech for the purpose of dealing with Dise gangs, and +1 PER when trying to avoid trouble in the dangerous back alleys of Dise. This perk is incompatible with Sorrow in Success or Confusion in Compromise.

((A/N: ~No One~))

[[ED Note: Hey guys, this is theBSDude. No One has allowed me this space to correct a small travesty. [Mane Effect](#), an excellent Mass Effect fusion fic, does not have nearly the readership it deserves, less than 400 unique views at the time of writing. It's top-to-bottom, FoE-style integration of Mass Effect and FiM, with one of the most interesting takes on Shepard I've ever seen.]]

## Chapter 25: Shadows

*“You're no savior. Your talents lie elsewhere. “*

The radiation dial on my pipbuck slowly ticked upwards. Perhaps I should have seen it coming, this outcome. Well, I'm not sure how I could have seen The Laughing Stallion exploding coming, but I should have expected that I would have failed in some spectacular way. It wasn't even that I failed, it was that I failed without ever getting close. I never had a chance to save the Chairpony, or the Batmare, or Pinprick. Even if I had tried harder, done better, I couldn't convince myself that I would have been able to save them. That was what hurt the most. Not only that I let good ponies die, but that even if I tried my hardest I would have been helpless to stop it.

When I was just a foal I was helpless to save my mother and brother, and I made myself a promise that I would never be helpless again. So I made myself stronger. I trained when I was alone, and became a mountain of a mare. Since I was a foal I was always big, but I made the choice to be strong. It didn't help. Even for all my strength I couldn't save Wildfire from being shot, and I couldn't save Foundation from...

In the end I was just as helpless as I was the day my mother was shot. Despite everything I did, everything I pulled myself through, I was eternally too late to be any good. Was it so much to ask that I could stop being helpless and actually save something before it gets destroyed. From Marefort, to Timber, to Bridle Hope, I could only ever help after the worst happened. Or, like Karkhoof, to make the worst happen.

“Hey, Silver.” I opened my eye and looked through the tears at Flare. “We need to go...” He was flying beside me where I hung from the remains of the catwalk. “Something went wrong, ain't gonna shit you about that, but you need to stow the tears until we're all safe.” I sniffled and tried my best to stop the flow. “Good... I'll ask what happened later.” The blue pegasus reached out a hoof to me.

Part of me didn't really want him to fly me back to the ground. I could have let go right there, fallen like Pinprick did. It would have been easier that way... but when did I ever do something the easy way. My eyes turned back up to the catwalk as I thought. That's when I saw her. Standing on top of the catwalk was the ghostly form of Wildfire. She was smiling sadly down at me, and seemed to nod, before she vanished from sight. That was all I needed.

I quickly let go of the railing and grabbed onto him. My whole body lurched downwards taking the pegasus with me. For a second I thought maybe I was going to fall anyway.

We only dropped a few feet before the furious flapping of Flare halted our fall. An odd chill moved slowly down my spine, and I wasn't sure if I should have been terrified, sad, or annoyed. I seemed to settle for a mix of all three as Flare slowly set me onto the safe ground. If the world wasn't in the middle of going to shit I would have kissed it.

“Momma!” Serenity ran out of nowhere and hugged my currently not working metal leg. “I was so worried! I thought'cha was gonna fall!” As I carefully wrapped my leg around Serenity, I looked around the train station. There was so much glass on the floor that it could have been mistaken for a carpet. The guard rail that surrounded the pit was shot all to hell, as were parts of the walls. And the corpses. At least a dozen minotaur corpses littered the ground on the side I was on, and on the other side I could make out just as many pony corpses.

As I looked over the wreckage I saw her... Pinprick, but she wasn't alone. There was a tiny figure hunched over the body rocking back and forth.

“C'mon...” I stop back to all fours and helped Serenity onto my back. “We need to do... something.” I limped over the small figure as Serenity poked at my deactivated leg.

Spitshine was hunched over her mother's bloody corpses and sobbing. As I got closer I could hear muffled

words, "Please... please get up... you can't... you're not allowed to... wake up... I'll be good, I swear... Momma... Momma I need you, please..." The filly's voice choked up. "Momma..."

"Flare..." The blue pegasus who was flying beside me raised an eyebrow. "I need you to take Spitshine to Haze, please." He nodded confidently.

"Spitshine..." I walked closer to her, but kept myself at a respectable distance. "We need t-"

"Why didn't you save her!" Spitshine didn't even look at me. "Why didn't you... she always said you saved her, but now... you should have. Why didn't you..." she broke down sobbing again. "Go away... just... go... I hate you, all of you."

"It's not safe here..." I said in my softest voice. "You need to go. Your momma would want you safe." The truth was that no place was safe anymore, not after what had just happened. Dise was a powder keg, and somepony just lit the fuse. Still, if anyplace was safe in Dise it was an invisible orphanage under the city, so I had to try and help Spitshine. It was the least I could do. The very least.

"I'm not leaving her... I'm not leaving Momma..."

"We'll come back for her, I promise... but you need to be safe first. She loved you more than anything, she wants you to be safe..." Slowly Spitshine looked over to me with her bloodshot red eyes. "Please..."

"I... I don't want to... but Momma always said... I gotta be safe." She rubbed her eyes. "You better not lie, you g-gotta come back for her... or else!"

"Yes... I promise. We all do." Flare and Serenity both nodded their agreement, "Flare... I need to do something. Take Spitshine to Haze, then come back for Pinprick. We'll be back in the city as soon as possible."

"Yeah, okay." He landed on the ground and lowered his body. "Get on Spit, I'll take you to safety."

The little filly nodded and slowly climbed onto Flare's back her eyes still wet with tears. She took a glancing look back at her mother, and started sobbing again. Tearing her gaze away from her dead mother Spitshine latched onto Flare's mane for something to cry into.

Flare looked down at me. "Don't think we can blame this one on Curly Fries, can we?" I gave an exasperated sigh and shook my head. "Don't think so... Don't stay above ground too long; Celestia knows how much radiation we're in for." He flapped his wings a few times and took to the air. I watched him fly until he was safely out of the train station, and I could turn my attention to other pressing matters.

Not that my job for Mayhem really mattered at all. Something insane just happened, the Chairpony of the NCA was dead, along with The Batmare, Pinprick, probably Lucky, and countless others. The city was being blanketed by radiation, and to top it off, the NCA and Minotaurs were at war. Basically everything ever sucked, and I was still going to do a job for some fuckhead because I made a promise. And why not? I'd probably fail that and die, and won't that be fun.

"Momma?" Serenity tugged at my mane. "Are yo-"

"Fine... I need..." I lowered my gaze to the broken body of Pinprick. "I need... my..." I turned away from her, from my failure. "My leg and eye got deactivated, can you start them up?" My filly said nothing, and got to work.

There was a stinging feeling as she powered up my leg and eye, and it was as painful as ever. I just didn't care. It felt pointless, everything did. If ever there was a chance to make a difference, to save somepony, to be a hero it would have been here, it would have been stopping this whole mess, but I failed. With my failure ponies better than I died. So why try? Nothing I did mattered. I had my chance and let it burn.

Perhaps it was for the best. Heroes always seemed to die, or stop being heroes.

"Where we goin' anyway? What's this secret mission thingy, an' why didn't ya tell us sooner?" Serenity said quietly from my back.

"Make sure the Minotaur King gets out alive... Did you see which way he went?" In all the chaos I wasn't

able to follow his movements. Not that I had really tried. Perhaps I should have. That at least I could have done.

“Uh, well... when the shootin' started, Flare drug me behind a wall for protectioning, but I could'a sworn I saw some of the minotaurs head down the stairs in the centre there... Uh, Momma. Why're we helpin' them? Ain't they sorta like the enemy?”

“No...” I headed across the glass-strewn floor and ignored the pain as my hooves got cut and scratched.

“They're not... we work for House not the NCA... and this whole thing was set up... and... trust me.”

“Alright! When has that ever gone wrong!” Great, sarcasm. That was exactly what I needed. Why couldn't ponies just take me at my word? Oh, right, because I was always wrong and all my plans backfired on me in a spectacular manner. How could I forget...

Still I had a job to do, and despite the pointlessness of trying, I had to finish it, if for nothing else then the sense of normality to it. My name was Hired Gun after all, and even if the world was going to shit, it was my job to do petty assignments for piddling amounts of caps.

Thankfully, once we got down the large staircase in the middle of the room most the of the glass cleared up. Except for the pieces sticking out of my hooves of course, they didn't go anywhere. Thank Celestia I was still high on Med-X, or else it would have really hurt. So I was probably going to regret it later, but I regretted everything, so it was nothing new.

As we neared the first small platform (which seemed to allow access to an area below the train station), we heard shouting further down. I could barely make out the sounds, but I did feel a burning sensation in my shoulder, and a few seconds later Serenity said. “Ponies downstairs yellin' an' tellin' someone to stop and drop their weapons.... ah think on the next level down.”

Had I more time, I would have questioned how she did that (or at least ask when she had modified her sound spell to amplify, not block out sound) but it was apparently urgent. I would have jumped down the stairs, but the idea of falling any length at all right then made my stomach twist so I made do with a running trot until I reached the second basement level. “Where to!?” That was a stupid question. Straight ahead was more stairs, and to my left was rubble blocking an entrance to whatever was supposed to be on this level, so I turned right.

I barrelled through a door that read 'Offices,' into a series of tight hallways and small rooms. It was so cramped I could barely move at all. It clearly wasn't designed for running, or anypony tall. Normally I would take the time to explain how bland and drab the colour scheme was, but I had voices to follow, and by then I could hear them without Serenity's help.

“You will tell me your name!” A commanding voice shouted, but there was no reply. It was enough to give me a sense of direction, just down the hall and- shit!

Next thing I knew I was sprawled on the ground and my face stung. I let out a pitiful groan and I picked myself up with my forehooves and looked to see what tripped me. To my eternal annoyance it was nothing more than some sort of cord running down the hallway. Who the hell would put that there, it was a hazard. I mean sure, nopony would expected someone to be running down this hallway but... yeah it was my fault.

“Momma, stop layin' around.” Serenity, who must have fallen off my back, nudged at my flank with her head. “Get up, c'mon, you're tha one what wanted'a save whatshisname.” Thanks for the support.

“Yeah.” I picked my hind legs up and started off again, this time in much slower trot, because I would rather not fall again. Strangely enough, the wire was going in the same direction I was. I studied it as I trotted down the hallway, and for some reason it looked, well, not new (hardly anything was truly new in the wasteland) but newer. Of course, the realization of what it was didn't hit me until the wire turned into the room the voices were coming from.

I didn't turn into the room right away though, instead I did the (almost) smart thing and slid up against the wall, and peeked into the room to see what was going on. There were four NCA ponies (thankfully none of them were ones I knew) holding three minotaurs at gunpoint. The one I identified as the Minotaur King was

standing with his hands up, while his guard were both on their knees, (minotaurs have knees, right?) with their hands on their head. This was not counting the several dead ponies and minotaurs littering the room... wait... my eye was giving one of them a box, so it must have been living. A brown minotaurs lying beside a... large camera...

Holy shit.

My eyes scanned the room again, and sure enough the broken body of the NCA Chairpony was there too.

“Alright, you beasts,” the NCA soldier said. “You’re coming with us.”

I motioned for Serenity to stay out of sight before I jumped into the doorway and pointed Subtlety. “Sorry. You can’t do that.” Only the commander of the soldiers and one other pony turned to look at me, while the others kept their weapons trained. “I need the King.” My brained worked quickly. “By orders of Mayhem.” I had to take the job, and I had to complete it. But Mayhem only told me not to tell Serenity, Flare, or Mr. House about it, he said nothing about the NCA.

“Are you fucking kidding?” The commander attempted to size me up, but much to his dismay I was still bigger than him. “You’re a big motherfucker, but even with that you can’t hope to take the four of us.” Oh I had no doubt I could completely destroy them. I’ve smashed through ranks of Steel Rangers, so this would be foal’s play. Only I made a promise to myself not to kill them.

“Maybe not.” I lied. “But I can kill him.” Subtlety was actually pointed at Ginger across the room. “Do you have any idea. What a 50. Cal does to a pony? Or minotaur? He’ll be paste.” Of course my gun was actually still disconnected from my battle saddle thanks to that fucker, Dragonslayer, but they didn’t need to know that. If it worked on a god, it would work on them.

The stallion gulped sharply before glaring, “So fucking what. We’ll have the King, and you’ll be dead.”

“You don’t want the King.” I smirked. “Not as much. Anyway. Ginger killed your leader. Everypony knows it. You could be the one to bring him. To justice. And. He’s more important. He was involved. Do you really think. The King would come here himself. If he was planning on blowing it up? He didn’t know. Only he did.” My gun motioned forward at Ginger. “He’s who you want. He could give you. What you need.”

There was a few seconds of chilly silence before I saw his expression soften. “And what am I supposed to tell The Major General? That I let the King out of my grasp? That I let him go?!”

“The truth.” I lowered my mouth to the dysfunctional firing bit. “Tell her. You had a choice. Between the King. And Ginger. You choose the option. That made sense. You can see it, can’t you?” He raised an eyebrow at me, but also visibly seemed to back off. “Something is wrong. This whole thing. Pieces don’t fit together. Things don’t make sense. There will be war. After all this. But with him... With him you could end it sooner. Or prolong it. If that’s what you find. But the truth here? It’s not with the King.”

The commander seemed to think this over before turning and whispering something to the pony beside him. “We keep the guards.” My eyes darted over to the, obviously confused, Minotaur King.

“One. You get one.” The King nodded slowly in approval.

The officer hummed to himself before staring at the ground and growling. “Fine... release the King... and one guard. Now.”

“Sir,” one of the of subordinates said in a wavering voice. “Are you sure this is wi-”

“Don’t question me, welp, and release the fucking prisoners.” The Soldier stood quickly to attention and moved away so the King, and one of his guards, could get up. For his part, the King seemed apprehensive about the situation, but took a few slow steps forward. When he saw that he wasn’t being shot he, and one of his guards ran past the NCA ponies, and past me, into the hallway.

Just to be safe I kept my gun trained on Ginger for a little more than a minute. “Well?” the officer said in a tone that seemed to suggest he was annoyed with me. “Go, we’re not going to follow.”

“What’s your name?”

“Huh, what? What does it matter.” The guard narrowed his eyes at me. “Major Knife Fall.”

“Major Knife Fall...” I said the name slowly as I looked over to where Serenity was waiting. I gave her a short nod and she quickly climbed onto my back. “It's been a pleasure, the Mustangs send their regards.” Before he could get in another word, I turned and galloped back down the hall, though this time I was careful to avoid the wire.

While I was not the fastest of ponies, it turned out that I was at least faster than bipeds, because by the time I reached the landing, I had caught up to the Minotaur King and his guard. No wonder they were caught. “Get going!” I yelled at them, “You need to get out before more come.”

“I cannot.” The King's voice was surprisingly youthful. Out of all the minotaurs I have heard (that is, two) he was by far the youngest sounding. “I must capture and prosecute the traitor. It is our way.”

“Well getting you out alive is my way! So go!” As I shouted I heard voices to my left. Sure enough at the top of the stairs a whole squad of NCA ponies were lined up and heading down. “Shit, move!” I pointed my gun, “Move or I'll shoot your legs and carry you. I'm saving you whether you like it or not, so go!”

“I... but...” He turned to his guard, who silently nodded. “Fine. This way then, quickly.” He started running down the stairs.

“This is a great idea!” Serenity said from my back as I followed them down the stairs. “Follow da monsters'n people ta protect'em.” As soon as we got to the bottom floor (which was, as I suspected, a train station) the Minotaur King jumped off the platform and started hitching it down one of the dark tunnels. “Oh! Follow'em inta tha darkness too!”

“Serenity, please stop.” I jumped off the platform and followed quickly behind them. How they were able to see I wasn't sure, but my eye quickly adjusted to the light. “Trust me. It'll be fine.” Well, that was probably a lie. The region was at war now, no matter how you cut it, but the plan at least would be fine. Hopefully. Doubtfully. Nothing ever went right for me.

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The minotaurs seemed to know where they were going, if for no other reason than the fact that they just happened to find a torch lying there in the train tunnel. It was a little bit suspicious, but really to be expected given that is where the minotaurs seemed to be headed when the fight broke out. The tunnel itself was not the Dise tunnels I was used to, but instead a large cavernous thing like the tram tunnels under the Reconstruction Facility, only these were wider. It was a bit surprising to see them here at all, because I had no idea there were train tunnels near Dise at all.

Though, if I was correct, the tunnel we were following led away from Dise, not towards it. At least that is what my pipbuck map seemed to suggest. Given the size and scope of the train tunnel it wouldn't have surprised me if they were connected in with Wallkirk's tunnels. It'd seem the logical thing to do if people were riding the train when the end happened.

Which they were. This I figured out when we passed a long half-crushed train car filled with century old skeletons that had managed to crash despite being on rails. It was... a bit unnerving, the way the skeletons were piled on each other near the door. I had to wonder if they were moved that way by some scavenger, or if that is how they died, scrambling for an exit.

“Where are we going?” I had to ask, because we never seemed to stop walking. “Is there an entrance to the Dise tunnels? Show me to it. Then I'll go. You're safe now.”

“No, not safe here. Here is where they come to feed; little ponies should not be here alone.” The King said, but did not stop his fast pace. I immediately straightened up. There was no need to even tell me that 'they' were, because if it was something I had to fight then history dictated it was going to be some ungodly horror, or an arrogant jagoff. Given the feeding comment, the first was far more likely.

“Momma is not little at all!” Serenity said indignantly. “I am, but she's probably bigger'en you, 'cept you cheat 'cause yer on two legs.”

“Perhaps this little pony is less little.” He turned his head back to look at me. I don't think I liked the way his brow furrowed when he stared, as if trying to memorize what I looked like, or perhaps trying to figure out if he knew me. Or something. I'm not really the best at deciphering looks. “But little is still little, still, you saved my life, and for that you have my gratitude.” I'd rather he kept it. It was not like I saved his life out of the goodness of my heart, and while I didn't really care about the Minotaur v. N.C.A. squabble, I would rather not be associated with such an ostracized group. “To whom do I owe my thanks?”

“Hired Gun.” I looked away from the strange creature. “That's who I am. You should thank Mayhem. Circumstances forced me to take this job.” So long as he didn't go around praising me for saving him I would be okay.

“So you're a slave,” he remarked so casually I almost didn't realize what exactly he said.

“What!” My eyes narrowed into my usual glare. “I am not a slave.”

“Aren't you?” He didn't even seem to notice my annoyance. “My guard here...” He waved a... hand, I guess, at the green minotaur walking beside him. “Immovable Object, his name. His father was one of many who struck Hoof Town many years ago. Back during the first war. His father was unnerved at the violence, and he fled the field of battle. Because of this, his family now must pay his debt; his son must fight in his stead. Does this make him a slave?”

“I... what?” I guess that made him a slave? Sort of. It wasn't the usual definition, and the practice was a bit barbaric. “Maybe?”

“In the same sense you do not wish to do this job, yet you are doing it.”

“It was my choice...” For some reason I felt defensive.

“But you said yourself you did not wish to.” Now he was just pissing me off. “If it was your choice, but you do not wish to, then what convinced you?”

“I... it's my code. Always complete a job. To the letter.” I don't really think I liked what he was getting at. It didn't seem like he was trying to agitate me on purpose, but he was still doing a great job of it.

“Then you are a slave to your code. So it is your code I must thank?” He scratched at his chin with a claw. “I am not sure how one goes about that, so I guess I will thank you. For making the code that made you a slave. Thank you, Mr. Hired Gun.”

“Miss,” I corrected venomously. “I'm a mare.”

“Oh. My apologies. With ponies it can be hard to tell.” With me it was no doubt harder. Not counting my rather butch features I was also decked out in grimy armour that completely concealed any guess at knowing my gender. The closest give away would be my voice, but I couldn't really expect a non-equine to pick up on that.

“How do you tell on minotaurs?” Serenity seemed legitimately curious.

“Horns, it is the simplest ways. Bulls have them, cows do not.” He drew a hand up to his own pair of horns as if to explain what that meant. Or prove he was a bull? I'm not entirely sure.

Serenity went to give a reply, but was cut off when the Minotaur raised his hand from his side: “Shhh. There are things near... they come, be on your guard.” That'd be really easy, especially because I didn't actually have a gun that worked on me. Well, Subtlety worked, but it was disconnected from my battle saddle making it effectively... wait.. it still had a trigger right?

“Serenity!” She jumped on my head so she could look down at my face.

“What, Momma? Gunna tell me ta hide'an be safe?” Sort of the opposite of that. I took a quick look around the tunnel. The cavernous semi-circular hall was not as sturdy as I would have liked. Along the walls a series of doors could be seen (service tunnels, or entrances to the Dise underground?) and on the floor there were multiple grates, probably for floods or the like. Whatever 'they' were, I suspected they would come from one of those places.

Something fell on my head. For a brief second there was a strange pinching pressure on my head.

“GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF!” Okay. I might have panicked. Just a little bit.

BANG.

I wasn't sure who shot, but the thing (radscorpion, I'd find out) fell off my head a second later. “Momma are you ok....ay...” She gulped as I felt something drop onto my flank. “Run!”

I didn't need to be told twice.

Not that I ran far though, just enough to get to the two minotaurs, and turn sharply to see what the hell was going on. It was not good. Almost instantly, my EFS started showing hostile after hostile, until it was just a thick red line. From the ceiling radscorpions came pouring out one after another in a colossal torrent of stinging death. Then they started to move towards us. “Serenity.” The closest one broke out in a running scuttle. “Serenity, pistol now!”

She tossed the weapon into the air and I caught the still smoking pistol in my mouth with just enough time to adjust my aim and blast the thing to pieces. The spray of blood and ichor did absolutely nothing for the hundreds more pouring from the ceiling and filling the tunnel. There was a sickening sensation in my gut as they swarmed closer. Maybe (for whatever reason) I was strong enough to withstand their poison, but not even I could survive that many.

“Die.” I fired a bullet into the hoard, but it moved forward without even noticing. “Please. Just. Die.” Bullet after bullet flew from the zebra-enchanted pistol until my mouth was sore from the impact, but still it came. Shit shit shit.

“Little pony!” There was a mind breakingly painful tearing sensation on my backside when something tugged hard on my tail. “Run!” Right. Fear overcame pain as I turned tail and ran.

I was not a fast pony, but at that moment I felt as fast as Flare. My hooves pounded into the concrete so hard that it sent shock-waves up my back (thought that was mostly the fault of my injured backside). As I ran, I couldn't help but notice the minotaurs were starting to lag behind. They just weren't built for speed. Part of me whispered to survive, to let them die and be eaten by the teeming mass to give me time to escape. The more sensible part reminded me that I was apparently running towards a Minotaur base, and they'd probably shoot me on sight if the King wasn't with me.

So I took a look back. They were so far back that the Scorpions were nipping at their heels. With poisoned stingers that didn't bode well at all. I skidded to a stop, and did a one-eighty towards the stupid slow bipedal idiots. “Serenity! Head.” I shouted.

“But Momma, you're running the wro-”

“Just do it!” I'd have to apologize for my tone later, but all that mattered was getting us all to safety. It was stupid I know, but as I ran to the King's aid I couldn't help but think that maybe this time I'd actually save someone. Maybe this time I wouldn't fail.

I got to them just as the swarm was about to overtake them. One of the foul black creatures had managed to wrap it's legs around that of the fleeing King with it's stinger poised to strike. My hoof was just in time. The metal prosthetic (Serenity said that means 'fake leg'. Or something) slammed into the wide of beast with enough force to send it flying back into the swarm. For the briefest of a second I thought I saw the King look at me with surprise in his dark eyes, but I didn't have time to verify.

“Move!” I shouted as my metal leg slammed into the tail of a larger beast, severing it completely. “Faster! I'll push them back.” Not for long, but I'd try, dammit. The King seemed to be in wordless agreement as he scrambled down the hall at an increased speed. Not fast enough, not nearly.

Without warning, there was a burst of fire beside me. My heart jumped and I scrambled backwards from the too-close flames. The flames weren't alone though, being wielded by the torch-carrying Immoveable Object, the King's guard. And it worked. Sort of. The Swarm didn't stop so much as pause—balk at the swinging flames. But the torch was small, and swarm larger than was reasonable.

“Go,” he grunted as he swung the flames. “Protect the King.” But. He shouldn't have to. He was a slave, right? Or so the King said. How could I let someone like him take my place. Sure, he was just a minotaur, but it felt. Wrong. It felt. “GO!” He kicked his goat-like leg at me. It missed, but I got the message and flew the opposite way down the tunnel once more.

I looked back as I ran though. How could I not? I saw as the black mass surrounded him slowly. As they did, he waved the torch around wildly, trying his best scare them off. It wasn't going to happen though, I think he'd known all along. But he kept trying. Even as they started to swarm over his body, he swung and flailed. And when he fell and the creatures amassed around his fallen body there was a burst of flames from the centre as something in the mass took to fire.

But it was snuffed out a second later, and they started at us once again. Worse, they seemed to move faster now that they'd got a taste.

By then I had all but caught up with the King, and the sight wasn't pretty. Without the torch to guide him (and lacking cybernetics to assist) he was running blind. His legs were bleeding, and something stuck out of his arm. “Serenity, keep low!” As soon as I felt her press her little body flat against my skull, I charged forward harder.

By bending down low, I caught the King under the knees, making him twist and fall. It took a great deal of skill, and much more luck, but I managed to get him to slam stomach first onto my back. He was as heavy as anything I had ever lifted, but my body was filled with so much adrenalin, so much will to escape, that I hardly noticed. At first anyway.

Sure enough, the longer I ran, the heavier he felt, and the slower we moved. “This is no way to treat a king.” he protested, giving me something to think about other than our impending death.

“It is a way. To save a king. Keep still! And quiet!”

As dramatic as that was, I was starting to get the feeling that it was far from accurate. The mass didn't seem like it was slowing down anytime soon, and I had no idea how much further I had to run. Worse was the fact that we had almost been caught up to. “Fuckfuck.”

Luck was on my side (for once) because as I rounded a sharp bend I saw a faint light at the end of the tunnel. It had to be our destination. The way to safety. Or it was some sort of light monster leading me into it's mouth, but that'd be a cleaner death than that of a thousand thingies.

“There!” The King shouted from his lofty position on my back. “Faster!” I tried! Really. But with such a weight on my back, and the pain of my previous adventures (like stepping through glass) coming back, I just couldn't force myself any harder.

Which was precisely when I felt a sharp stinging sensation right above my hoof. Without even looking back I somehow found the will to push myself hard, distancing me somewhat from the swam. It wouldn't last though. All I could do was pray to Celestia above to grant me some sort of mercy and let the King speak true.

“Who goes the-” A voice from the light shouted as we came closer.

“I AM THE PRIME MINISTER! READY FLAMETHROWERS!” The King bellowed from my back.

The minotaurs came into view from the blinding light a second later. There was some sort of instalment of lights, and mounted guns, but I didn't care. I slammed through the barricaded, and into the nearest Minotaur in my haste. The four of us tumbled head over hooves as I felt a blast of heat from behind me, followed by the sound of a thousand screeching rad-scorpions.

I turned my head from my awkward fallen position to see a wall of orange flame and black burning limbs covering the tunnel. It was the first time in a long time that the sight of fire didn't make me freak out. I did. I saved someone. I actually managed to save someone. It wanted to laugh but everything hurt too much.

Wait...

My mind rewound to a few seconds earlier, and I looked over at the Minotaur King who was lying on his back. “You're the prime minister?”

---

To explain my confusion over The Prime Minister's correct titles you have to understand that my job was to save the Minotaur King. Not Prime Minister. Right after hearing that I had worried that I had been through all that, just to save a minotaur I wasn't contracted to save. It would have been beyond frustrating. Thankfully that was not the case. Well, sort of.

“So you are the King?” After a few long confusing minutes at the front gate of the... town, I guess, we were instructed by the King to walk with him (with a few guards of course). I was still on the edge of deciding if the underground settlement was a town or a military encampment. On one hoof it seemed to be filled with Minotaurs performing drills, but on the other I saw a more than a few calves running around.

“Yes and no,” he answered as he walked beside me. “By all accounts, the line of Kings died out during the war, but when addressing pony-folk we still style ourselves as such. We have found that ponies are more receptive to royal monikers than political ones. Even independent Caledonia worshipped the princesses before the war, after all.”

It was strange walking in that town. I decided that right away. As we passed the rows of tents that lined the tunnel walls I could see and feel creatures inside staring at me. It was as if they had never seen a pony before, or at least never saw one there. I wondered if that was how Ginger felt in Dise. It was... odd to be the minority.

“What does that mean. Prime Mini Star, that is.” Serenity leaned onto my head to ask the question.

“It means instead of ruling by divine authority, like the Princesses, I rule by election.” He chuckled. “You ponies have elections in some of your cities, right?”

“Ya Huh.” Serenity said in a slightly higher-pitched voice. I knew that tone well enough, it meant she knew something she thought was cool and wanted to tell someone about it. “Eye Glow has a Mayor, is that sorta the same? I remember the election a little, it was cool. There was a parade, then a gunfight.” That sounds like my kind of parade.

“Perhaps they are similar. Would you like to hear the process?” Dear Celestia no. Please. No politics. I looked around frantically for some sort of escape, but all I managed to do was come face to face with a goat. Which proceeded to bleat in my face. “Don't mind them.” The Prime Minister glared down at the goat. “Don't you have somewhere to be?” The goat bleated again before trotting off. “Sorry about that, some of them don't know their place.”

“I've neva' seen a goat before.” Serenity stared over at the strange skinny legged creature.

“You probably won't again.” The king seemed agitated now. “They're... workers.”

“Like Immoveable Object?” I asked pointedly.

“Yes, they are indentured servants to the minotaur race for...” He rubbed his forehead with one of his massive clawed hands. “It matters not little pony. I am sure you are not interested in ancient treaties and the like. Simply accept it and move on.” Yeah, I wasn't interested in anything of the sort, but it was better than a huge speech on how the minotaurs political structure worked, because really I didn't care.

“I guess not...” He led us to a door in wall of the tunnel that we had to squeeze past tents to get to. They really could use work on their space management.

“Now we have a problem.” The Prime Minister (does he even have a real name?) said tapping on the door with his claw. “We do not take prisoners of war, you see.” This didn't sound good at all. “But at the same time you did me a great service... twice over. And yet, the knowledge of this base is a secret, and if word got to to your pony government how close we are to them... well, we would have a problem. So far we've gotten away with it because the rad-scorpions make the tunnel too dangerous to travel normally, so they haven't checked, but if you told them...”

“I won't.” I gulped nervously. “You have my word.” Which as about as good a word as you could get from anyone. I did save him twice on it after all... yet I still doubted he would be swayed that easily.

“Yes, yes of course. But I still risk this encampment on the word of a pony.” Racist. “I will need to think on it. For now you will be our... let’s say honoured guest. There was a general who used this room as his quarters, but he was a casualty of that mess, so it's yours. If you want to wander the camp, feel free, but you'll need a guard with you at all time.”

“So I'm a prisoner here?”

“Oh of course not!” He chuckled good naturedly. “You can leave anytime. Just not alive. Lets just say you're a prisoner here as much as you are a slave to your code.” Briefly I wondered what the punishment for murdering a Prime Minister was. Maybe it'd prove my strength and they'd make me P.M. Instead.

“Thanks...” I opened the door slowly. “I guess.”

“I'll make my decision within twenty-four hours. Fair warning, if I take longer than that, you're better off trying to make a run for it.” He gave me a short bow. “Thank you once again for risking your life to save mine twice. I pray Discord's blessing on you.”

I was halfway through the door when I had to stop and turn around to give him a dazed look. “Discord?”

“Who else?” He motioned to his large body slowly. “Do you think anyone but the Lord Of Chaos would create beings such as us? Legend has it he grew bored in his first reign and crafted the first of us from a goat, a bull, and an ape...” he gave me a level look. “Why did you think we joined the great war on the side of the zebras? You ponies imprisoned our god.” That, made a certain amount of sense. Maybe that's what the final straw was in the train station. Ginger praising Discord.

“Oh...” I said dumbly. “I see.” The P.M. gave me a look that resembled a glare before nodding and turning around with one of the guards. The other two minotaurs remained though and flanked my door. With a sigh I walked into the room as instructed and took a look around.

It was a small room, perhaps a large maintenance closet in a past life, with too many amenities that made it feel cramped. I guess if I walked on two legs it'd be easier to navigate. Taking up one side of the room was a surprisingly large fold up cot, while a large desk took up part of the opposite wall. Due to the narrowness of the room, however, the two things looked to be right next to each other to the point you could fall backwards off the Desk chair directly onto the bed. Off in the corner was a tall skinny wardrobe. Most of all though, the room was clean, so clean that the walls looked white. I guess the minotaurs favoured cleanliness, or the former general was a germaphobe.

The door slammed shut so hard behind me that I nearly jumped. I didn't bother looking back though, instead I took a few slow steps towards the desk. On it was a book that looked to be a diary, and for a second I really wanted to read it. To find out more information about the minotaurs. After how long I had been in Dise everything I had heard about minotaurs had been myth, legend, or biased propaganda. Getting information was rare, after all... yet...

Yes, I didn't care. After I carefully helped Serenity off my back, I flopped over on the cot and closed my eyes.

Things had happened so fast I had barely had time to let the gravity of the situation truly sink in. Now that I was away from danger and responsibility, I could truly think about what had happened. It wasn't pleasant. The memory of me hanging there helplessly as Pinprick was killed, trying to defend me no less, the thought of her daughter crying over a broken corpse, the sound of The Batmare's horn cracking, the feeling of pressure as the blast wave washed over my body and showered me with glass, all of these things came rushing back to me. It was like being there again, seeing the chaos and confusion, and once again being powerless to do anything to stop it.

If there was anything I loathed, it was being helpless. My entire life, I'd done my best to avoid that fate. I'd always been big, but I chose to be strong, but even that didn't save Foundation. I'd tried to push ponies away, thinking that if I wasn't close to them then I wouldn't be put into a position where I was powerless. It was a silly notion, and did nothing at all to save Wildfire. I tried to be a hard-ass, but that just changed me from helpless to destructive. Even then I was always too late.

I was too late to save Foundation, too slow to make Wildfire duck. I managed to get to Timber only after it

burned, and got caught up in my own drama that I couldn't help Bridle Hope. Maybe I was just too slow. I couldn't put the pieces together fast enough, so everything I did was delayed. If I was as smart as Serenity maybe I could have stopped what happened at the train station. Figured out something was fishy.... or something.

With a groan I rolled over in the cot. Part of me didn't care if the Minotaurs did kill me. At least it'd be actually saving someone. Go out on a high point. It would be easier that way. Just let it all fall into somepony else's hooves. Stop worrying about the conspiracies and plots, and everything that made Dise, Dise.

Then I thought about the blade sliding into Pinprick's neck. Somehow I don't think I would ever forget that, and I was glad for it. It gave me something to hold onto. Maybe I could die, but I didn't want to die until I had ripped off Dragonslayer's head, and then slaughtered every single mysterious pony he was working for. That was something. Revenge. I'd tried being a hero, and that had failed; maybe I'd do better if I was motivated by revenge.

I guess for that matter I still had High Stakes and Smooth Tongue. Maybe I'd put all their heads on pikes when I was done. That was if I ever got out of this situation. Knowing my luck that was far from likely, but still I could dream, right?

Of course.... Living meant I'd need to go back to Dise. I wasn't sure I could take going back to the city that I failed so thoroughly. It would be washed in radiation by then, and somehow I suspected the bubbling gang war would finally spill over into the streets. It was close before, when I killed Roy, but after the explosion.... Hooves would be pointed, ponies would be desperate, and the stronger of the gangs would try to devour the weaker ones.

Maybe lying in the bed forever would be easier then. I'd be dragged into the inevitable gang war, as it's what I'm paid to do. No part of me wants to fight that war. I thought before that Mr. House had the right vision for the city, that he had the ambition and ability to unite it. Yet lately it seems all he can do is further divide and conflict it. Maybe I made the wrong choice, but what were my choices.

A large stallion with a grandiose self image, and sense of importance? An easily angered and extremely violent mule? An old mare, who by all accounts shouldn't have been in power as long as she was. Sure those were just the main gangs, but what else could I join? I wasn't an NCA citizen. The Finishers were too weak to make any sort of difference. As an Earth Pony, I couldn't join the Enclave, or the minotaurs. The Steel Rangers were right out, for obvious reasons. Sure I could have joined 'The Watchers,' but their leader, Clean Cutt, gave me the creeps, and I'd be a shit doctor. Mr. House was really my only choice, and I still felt like shit for making it.

Maybe I would just sleep here for ever. No responsibility. No need to get up. Just sleep. Maybe I'd dream without nightmares too. It sounded pleasant really. Maybe if I escaped here I would go wander in the Dise tunnels until I found orb we buried, and it'd let me sleep. I wouldn't have to worry about this. I wouldn't be haunted by memories. Maybe then I could be at peace...

"Momma." Something nudged my back lightly. "Momma, I'm hungry."

Of course, I still had at least one reason to stay awake.

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"What a fine selection... of rad scorpion meat." I said. The yellow bull standing on the other side of the table merely grunted in response to me.

It really was a good selection. Small rad scorpions, large ones. Red ones. Blue ones. Rad-scorpion on a stick, or sauteed in oil. I guess when your town lived underground then you didn't have much in the way of variety. Or, more likely, they were hiding all the good food from the freaky pony. I don't think I've been glared at more in my life than when I walked through the tent town. Even my so-called chaperon was glaring at me for all it was worth.

"Are you buying?" The bull glared down at me. It was... unsettling. I really hated when ponies, er, people were taller than me. Which didn't happen very often -- except in this minotaur town. They were all friggin'

huge. Thankfully I was still fairly sure I was stronger than all of them. Which is not saying much as I've still yet to meet anypony (anyone) who has some close. Except for Torr, but I kicked his ass.

Serenity put her hooves on the table so she could get a look at the food. After a few sniffs it looked like she was about to gag, but she eventually said, "Still hungry. Can we get the ones on the stick?" They must have smelled the least bad.

"Two of those... things." The minotaur nodded and turned around.

Behind him was an open tent with what looked like a barbecue inside with a goat standing in front of it. The minotaur, to my surprised, bleated at the goat in what sounded like a harsh tone (I could be wrong, I don't speak goat) before turning back to me and grunting. "Is that your daughter?"

Before I even had a chance to reply Serenity cut me off, "I am, she's my momma." I could hear the pride in her voice. "Only just recently." The Minotaur raised an eyebrow but did not question her on that. "Isn't she awesome?"

"She is a small pony. Many scars. Bad fighter, or too many fights." A little bit of both. My fighting style wasn't what you'd call refined. Though I did routinely turns ponies into refined paste.

"Lots of fights, she's awesome at fighting, just..." She hummed over the wording before saying, "Just lots'a ponies wanna kill her. Robots sometimes too. An' animals, but not nearly as many of them! This one time she fought these giant snakes though! It was awesome! An' really scary." Ah yes, the infamous land sharks. How I hated thinking back to them. Thankfully I rarely did as they were overshadowed by my guilt ridden mind by the events of Karkoof.

"And survived?" The yellow minotaur sized me up. "Metal leg, and eye. Pony technology. She is lucky." He walked back to the Goat to yell at it about something, and it was then I realized that the bottom half of the bull's right leg was made from wood.

"Awww." Serenity noticed too. "Oh! I could make you a new one, mister." Considering her earlier reservations against Minotaurs she seemed to be warming up very nicely. Perhaps being around them enough convinced her they weren't going to eat her, or something.

"No." He turned back to us once he was done bleating at the goat, though now he was carrying two plates of food. Or rather 'food'. "Pony technology is not allowed. We must recreate without help." I'm sure rampaging through pony lands would help that, but I wasn't about to question their motives. To their face at least. "Here food."

Serenity attempted to sway the bull's opinion by pouting at him as she nibbled at her scorpion shish kebab, but he seemed unswayed. I decided it would be best to change the topic before her pouting got any worse. "So. Those goats." I looked behind the yellow bull to where the goat was still standing. "Why do they... work for you?"

"Pony would not know story." The yellow minotaur looked thoughtfully at me before deciding he did want to answer. "During the war, goats lived with us. Fought with us. They were almost equals. Then they betrayed us. Some took a megaspell to the heart of our capital. The price for cowardice and treason is paid for in their sons' and daughters' lives. But such a crime that even if all sons and daughters for a thousand years paid it would not be worth. So we took all of their kind in payment. Until the debt has been settled." Somehow I got the feeling the debt would not be settled for a long time.

"So they're your slaves." I said coldly before biting down into the food I was given. The strange juices of the meat flooded into my mouth, and nearly made me gag at first, but after a second it became... not good, but tolerable.

"Yes. No." That was a helpful answer, but I was not asking a question so it didn't really matter. "They are not bought or sold or traded. They are given to those who need them." he grunted in annoyance. "Begone, pony. I have work." He snorted and turned away from me.

"Nice guy." I muttered as I walked away.

“I wanted ta build him a leg.” Of course Serenity did.

“How did you plan to do that? You can't make one from scratch.” I said after finishing my meal. Okay, the food was actually good. Minotaurs managed to take a disgusting bug thing and make it eatable. Somehow.

“Still got that one I made for you after your old one got smashed. At least you should.” She looked at me accusingly. Did I still have that leg? It had been a while, and I nearly forgot about it. Just to make sure I lifted up my pipbuck and flipped through the menus with my nose until I found the inventory management part. Yup, it was still there. At my nod she continued. “Besides, his leg was missin' past the knee so it'd be easier ta make. An'a challenge! Never built anything for a minotaur before.” Nor was she likely too.

“Soon you'll be making full androids.” Serenity beamed at my compliment. “I'm still surprised you were able to learn. The Watchers seemed... less receptive to the technology.” We had to stop and stand to the side as a row of Minotaurs in full armour came barrelling by. I couldn't help but take a look at their guns as they passed, and I might have salivated a little bit.

“Well... It's not like they dislike it officially. Jus' they're associated with a religious thingy that dislikes 'em. Sometimes ponies come in what need help an' are cyborgs, and we help everyone so some ponies're trained in it. I jus' took ta it early because it's really cool!” She explained as the minotaurs passed. “If everyone was a cyborg it'd be so much easier... hey, Momma, can I ge-”

“No,” I said quickly. “Maybe when you're older.”

She waited for maybe a few seconds before responding, “I'm older now! Can I?”

“Much older,” I clarified.

“Awww, why?” She whined. As a foal I thought that I was good at whining to get what I wanted. After adopting Serenity, I realized I was subpar at best.

“Firstly, you're too young to make that decision, you might change your mind when you older. Usually cybernetics are a 'forever' deal.” Yes, I had this speech prepared in advance, because I knew eventually I was going to have to use it. “Secondly, you're still growing, so you'll have to get replacements every few months and there's no way to afford that. And finally; The technology is still growing, wouldn't you want to wait for cooler technology in ten years?”

Serenity opened her mouth to whine again, but closed it before I heard a peep. Her brow furrowed in confusion (probably over the fact I actually made a coherent argument) before she hung her head. “Good point.” She admitted. “Fiiiiiiiine, I'll wait. For a few years. How'd ya get so persuasive?”

“Dealing with you. If I didn't learn, you'd walk all over me. I don't have enough caps for that.”

“Now if only ya could talk ta any other pony without looking like yer about'ta tear their leg off and beat them with it.” Though I had never actually done that, I was positive I could if so inclined.

“That's a different sort of persuasive.” With that final snarky remark we found ourselves back in the doorway to our cell, I mean room. Not that I minded. The cramped room was better than a hundred accusatory glares.

“You, pony.” The minotaur who was guarding us said sharply as we moved towards the door. “I have a question.”

“What?” I snapped turning to glare at the much larger creature.

“Not you. Her.” The creature pointed down at Serenity with one of it's sharp claws. It made me want to kick his head inside out. Serenity took a step forward and nodded. “You. You work for this group. The Watchers?”

Serenity shook her head, but the minotaur kept, for a lack of a better word, watching her, so she explained. “I used'a... sorta. Why?”

The minotaur narrowed its eyes. My guess was that it was studying her, but for what reason I didn't know. “I see... don't trust them.” What a genius this minotaur was. Telling us not to trust a faction in Dise. As if that wasn't obviously. Not like he was biased because that Minotaur Ginger defected and joined them.

“Sure, whatever.” Serenity huffed before turning back into the room. Well, that soured her mood quickly. He

just had to ruin the only moment of levity in a really shitty day, didn't he. Without even bothering to say anything to him, I too walked through the door, and took the time to slam it shut. It was mostly for effect though, because if I was really angry, the door would have been in splinters.

“Hey, Momma.” Serenity had managed to usurp the bed from me while I was busy being childish, “Um...” She frowned and looked down at the blankets. Guessing that she wanted to talk about something serious I took a seat on the floor and motioned for her to continue. “What's gunna happen ta Spitshine?”

“I...” I shut my stupid mouth and decided to think before speaking. A rare event for me. “I'm not sure. It depends on what she wants.... Most likely she'll live with Platinum Haze and her orphanage.” The thought of Pinprick dying flashed through my memory again. I had to force the memory away. There would be plenty of time to dwell on that later. “If she doesn't want to stay there... I'm not sure. I'll do what I can for her.”

“Will she come travelling with us?” Huh? I hadn't really thought about that option. No part of me really wanted another daughter. As much as I loved Serenity, the idea of bringing another filly into the shit I got into didn't sit right.

“Uh... maybe.... Um.” If she really wanted to, I'm not sure if I'd say no. I owed it to Spitshine to make her happy. “That depends. Not if you didn't want her to.” With my new found ability to think ahead I realized that if Spitshine did start travelling with us, then it might just make Serenity jealous (for whatever reason) and if so it would be completely off the table. Serenity had enough to deal with that I couldn't add jealousy on top of it.

Though it was all mostly a moot point because I really doubted that Spitshine would want to travel with us after how much I was implicated in her mother's death. That is to say my failure directly caused it, and she was smart enough to realize it. Maybe to make it up to Spitshine, I'd capture Dragonslayer and let Spitshine kill him. That'd be nice right?

“I don't know... maybe having a sister would be nice, but I don't wanna share.” She fidgeted awkwardly. “That doesn't make me a bad pony, does it?” I really was the last pony in the wasteland to ask that question to. If I could tell the difference between good and bad I wouldn't have gotten into half the messes I did.

“I don't think so,” I said anyway drawing a hoof around her. “You've been through a lot; you deserve... more than I can give you.”

Serenity didn't respond right away. Instead she opted to sit quietly studying the bed. “Momma... why did he do it?”

I ran my hoof through her mane and asked, “Who?”

“Dragonslayer. Flare said he saw ya fightin' with someone who looked like him. It was him wasn't it?” I nodded. “Why did he kill Pinprick?”

“Pinprick was trying to stop him from killing me.” If she hadn't shown up at that exact time... well... nothing. He would have escaped just like he did, given he expected the explosion to kill me. That was... a depressing thought. She didn't even manage to save me, despite giving her life in the attempt.

“Well! Why was he tryin' kill ya?” She furrowed her brow. “Why did he want everpony ta starting fighting in Karkhoof too? He paid ya... and...” She frowned. That was not a pleasant memory for anyone.

“I don't know.” Maybe I'd ask him before killing him. “I'll... I'll find out. There has to be a reason. He'll pay for what he's done...”

“What if... maybe he had a reason... or he was confused. I mean... you've killed ponies too. Maybe he's like you.” Maybe... but someday I would have to pay for my crimes too. Hopefully after Serenity was grown, but eventually the family of one of the ponies I killed will come back to make me pay. If I had to guess it would be Jas, of the Crimson Hoof, whose wife I killed.

“I... I don't know. Ponies do things for complicated reasons. But even still, what he's done.” And what I've done. “I'm not sure if anything could... make up for that. But if he's trying to start a war.” I guess it would have been more correct to say 'If he tried to start this war' but I was still holding onto a slim chance that

maybe something would stop it. "Then he needs to be stopped."

Serenity nodded her understanding. "So... if you stop him.... will you be a hero, like The Batmare?" Nopony would ever be a hero quite like The Batmare.

"I'm not sure I want to be a hero. But... I still want to kill him. Or stop him. Or... I don't know..." I sighed and lowered my head. I wish I had better answers to her questions.

"I just wish ponies would stop fighting. Even the stupid minotaurs I guess... if everypony stopped fighting then maybe things would be better." She huffed. Pulling her into a tighter hug, I attempted to comfort her to the best of my ability. It wasn't fair that she had to be stuck in the middle of all this. Maybe it would've been better if I'd made her stay at Platinum Haze's orphanage.

"Just... get some sleep. We can't do anything until we get out of here." I added, "Whatever happens. I promise I'll keep you safe." I had no right to be alive after my numerous (and impressive) failures. But I had to be alive for Serenity's sake. She deserved a better mother, but she had me, so I wasn't going to let my guilt keep her from her happiness. One day, maybe not soon, but eventually, I would find a safe place for her, so we could live together in peace. At least until my past caught up to me. Leaning down, I planted a kiss on her forehead.

It didn't take as long as I had expected to get her to sleep, just getting her to lie down, then a few minutes of snuggling. It had been a long day, so I guess I should not have been surprised. After double checking that she was asleep, I carefully moved away from her. She was such a little thing, and the way she hugged that Scootaborg toy of hers just made her seem even smaller.

Then the guilt of dragging her through all such horrible places came back and I was forced to turn away.

Unfortunately, I wasn't really tired at all, and since there was no way I was going to leave Serenity alone, I was stuck in this tiny room. With a sigh I brought up my pipbuck and turned on the radio, though I was fairly sure it wasn't going to work underground. True enough, all I got was static and jumbled words.

"... *explo-... In the centre... rio-... confusion... unkno-... Watchers... radiation... range-...*" Groaning I clicked off the radio and mulled over what little I could make out. It was... useless, and told me nothing. I guess it was a worth a shot at least. I really wanted to know what was going on in the city after the explosion. How did the residents react to the radiation. Celestia knows why I actually wanted to know. Whatever was happening, it was bad, and it was my fault. There was nothing I could do about it.

I squeezed my eyes shut and ground my teeth together. I really wanted to kick something, but there was nothing around to kick. I just. "Fuck," I hissed. I needed to take my mind off... everything. Worrying more wasn't going to save anypony, only drive me crazy.

That's when I caught sight of the book on the desk. I'd seen it earlier, but hadn't wanted to read it then. With nothing else better to do, I decided to put my hard-won reading ability to the test. It was a tight squeeze, but I managed to sit beside the desk so I could read the book, without bumping into the bed. This room was still annoyingly small.

*"The council has once again rejected my proposal to change the electoral system."* Well, it was at least written in Equestrian, but one sentence in and I was already bored. *"They claim that my proposed changes were too orderly for a functioning government, and that it would go against Discord's will. More importantly, they once again claimed that I was bitter over my loss of the election. As much as they spout their religious malarkey, I still don't see why a chaos god would care about how we elected leaders. By all accounts Discord died two hundred years ago along with the pony Goddesses, so why should we follow such silly rules to honour him? There are claims he created our kind, and while this may be true it doesn't mean we should put so much reverence on him. To decide the election on the draw of a card is simply... I will never understand. Still, my reservations aside I must abide by their ruling and abide I shall."*

And this point in the writing a few things were scribbled and crossed out over a few lines before it continued. It wasn't what I would call 'interesting' but maybe it would help me sleep.

*"Beyond my continued annoyances at the council, my real reason for writing you is to tell you I have been*

*promoted to General, and am being stationed at a secret forward camp. Due to the nature of this position. I will not be able to send you any further letters, and I apologize. Soon this war will be over, and I will return. Please be patient and take care of the calves.*” There was further scribbling and the words “Rewrite.” written below it.

Sure enough when I turned the page I found the a slightly different variation on the letter. And on the page after. Apparently this minotaur had a thing for boring letters and perfectionism. Still, I scanned through the book. I had thought it was a diary before, but what it really was was a work book for a minotaur's rough drafts of letters. Most of the letters filled an entire page, a few two, but almost all were completely boring, and I was unable to get through a line without turning the page to find the next.

There was one, however, that consisted of a two lines, and a small note.

*“No, the war with the NCA is not an attempt to curb population growth due to recent food shortages. Why would you even waste time sending me this?”* On the side there was what looked like a personal memo. It was hastily scribbled so I couldn't make out the words, but the letters 'P.M.' stuck out like a sore thumb.

More political bullshit. Who knew the minotaurs were so stuffy?

Still, I kept reading. It wasn't really out of interest, more out of boredom. It was probably the most I'd read in a long time, and there was no doubt to me that I wouldn't remember any of it by the time I was done.

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Yeah, I fell asleep reading the book. This should be a surprise to exactly nopony.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

The loud banging jerked me awake. The room was still blurry, and I mumbled something incomprehensible.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“One... One sec.” I blinked a few times as I remembered where I was and what was going on. I moved over to the door, but stopped when I realized one of the pages had stuck to my face when I face planted onto it in my sleep. After carefully removing the offending page I looked over at the door. I didn't open it right away; a familiar sensation hit me. I reached into my saddle bag, took out a med-x, and injected myself.

With myself now safely calm, I opened the door.

“You know,” the minotaur King... Prime Minister... thing said before I even opened the door, “making a ruler knock thrice is grounds for an execution. You're lucky.”

“That's bullsh-” I stopped myself when I realized that might be offensive to an actual bull. “I mean. Untrue.”

“Probably. I am actually leaving, but I thought I would give you some good news, and some bad news.” He smirked. “The good news, little pony, is you can live.” Here comes the catch. “The bad news is. To live you must do a task for us. That thing, on your leg, it allows you to spot hostiles, right? Including animals?”

“Anything hostile. Why?”

“This morning the NCA has officially declared war. We have been at war for years, but now it's in writing, which means... a lot of things.” He crossed his arms. “This base is secure because of the radscorpion infestation. They're all over your tunnels, but worse here, so none of you ponies have ventured through this tunnel, but now it will cause a problem. We need it for a surprise attack and cannot risk being caught by those bugs. We have managed to find out where the queen is, which should cut down on the scorpion menace, allowing us free movement, but it would go easier with your assistance. Since you are able to spot these things without sound or sight, bringing you along would help the team we are sending.”

“You want me to... help clear out the only thing stopping you from surprising one of NCA's largest bases, in exchange for my freedom?”

“Quite.”

“Okay.” He blinked at me, almost shocked, before grinning. It was either that or dying, and more importantly

going on this mission would give me plenty of opportunity to escape without even doing the job. Considering he just confirmed that this train tunnel connected to the Dise underground.

“Good... good. Get your things in order, then talk to the guards. You'll be given the appropriate gear and instructions...” He stared at me for way too long before turning and walking away. It did not leave me feeling very hopeful.

I decided right away not to tell Serenity about the job. I for one didn't care about the NCA-Minotaur war, but she might, and I didn't want her to get the impression I sided with the minotaurs. Even if it was sort of true in this case, it wasn't true overall, because I really didn't care who won. No matter who won, Dise would lose, of this I was sure.

“Serenity.” I nudged her awake. “Wake up.” She blinked away and let out a heart-wrenchingly adorable yawn.

“Hmmm... hey Momma...” She rubbed her eyes. “We getta leave now?”

“Yes, sweetie. We need to do something first.” I explained to her the basic idea of what we had to do, but ignored the reason why. If anything, she would assume that it was to stop things like what happened to us yesterday. I also added the fact that if this was the 'Queen' it would reduce the rad-scorpion infestation under Dise. She seemed to agree with that, though she looked a bit worried at the prospect of going to hunt this thing. It was hard to reassure her of that, since I was just as worried, but given the circumstances...

It didn't take long for us to get our gear together, because we didn't really have much gear, and what we did have we'd never really unpacked. After some breakfast (grilled scorpion legs), we were taken to a large tent near the front of the tunnel camp.

Inside the tent I found myself surrounded by five rather large Minotaurs. All of them were decked out in heavy-looking black armour and large flamethrowers. The largest of the minotaurs opened the visor of his helmet and looked down at me. “Please relinquish your saddle weaponry and barding. We need to upgrade them with the proper equipment for this mission.” He looked over at my filly. “That might be difficult...”

“Okay...” I took off my battle-saddle and armoured barding and hoofed it over to the minotaur as requested, and he handed it over to a different minotaur who scooted out of the tent. “What is this about?”

“The most efficient way of handling the radscorpion threat is with fire. We are equipping you with a flamethrower, and upgrading your barding to make it at least partially fireproof. We are seeing if the filly can be made a set of barding, but if it is not possible, then she will be forced to stay here.” Let Serenity fight giant mutated bugs, or make her wait with minotaurs alone. What choices.

“I see.” I looked between them. “What exactly is my role...”

“You will point out groups so we can get the jump on them. Also, we have orders to kill you if you try to run off.” Well, that's no fun.

“Right. Gotcha. I wasn't planning on running anyway.” The minotaur gave me a level look and said nothing, but pulled his visor back down. “Okay...”

“Do you guys have names?” Serenity perked her ears up and looked between them. “My name is Serenity, and Momma's name is Hired Gun.” One of the Minotaurs snorted at the name. Still, after all these weeks, nobody believed it was my real name.

The lead minotaur didn't speak up, but one of them did. Given that she had no horns, I guess she was a cow. “Ignore him, little filly, he is just in a bad mood because he does not like your kind.” Her voice was muffled behind her mask, but it was still soft. She brought a hand to her chest. “I am Peace Of Mind, but you may call me Peace, or Pom.” She pointed out the two quiet minotaurs on either side of her, “These two are Forward Movement, and Forward Thinker. But we call them Move and Think.” Both grunted in greetings. The one she pointed to when she said 'Forward Movement' was a cow, like her, while the other was a bull. “And our fearless leader.” Fearless leader sort of sounds like a minotaur name. “Is Unrelenting Will.”

“Nice ta meet'cha!” Serenity smiled. “I like making new friends, are you my new friends now?”

“Sure, kid. And might I just say.” The cow looked at me. “I’m grateful that you saved our Prime Minister. It would be a hassle to do elections in a time like this.”

“Uh... you're welcome.” I took a seat on the ground. “How long is it going to take to get the gear?”

“A few hours. Intricate Detail likes to take his time.” Unrelenting Will said harshly. “Get comfortable.”

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You know what is not comfortable? Sitting in a room with four giant minotaurs. Never before had I felt so out of place, and I almost always felt out of place no matter where I went. It got better though, after about an hour the minotaurs all but forgot we were there, which let me zone out.

Once the smallish minotaur (taller than me, but shorter than the others) Intricate Detail came back, I was finally able to get suited up. My barding had been turned into a full body black armour similar to the ones the minotaurs wore. The barding now covered all three of my legs completely (not my metal one though) except for a hole where my pipbuck screen was. It also came with a gas mask (Made for a pony, I didn't ask how they got it) that was slightly too small, and didn't match. The only part of the armour that wasn't changed at all were the pockets on the collar where I kept emergency supplies.

My battle-saddle was also tricked out with a new flamethrower, though they said I had to give it back after the mission, and a gas tank on my back. As well they fixed the feed system for Subtlety that Dragonslayer broke the day before.

Serenity's armaments were less impressive. She got what amounted to a large black fireproof sheet with a head hole cut in. Once she put it on, the sheet covered her tail and all four legs as if she had a blanket draped over herself. Which was essentially what it was. She also got a gas mask, but one far too large for her head (Her horn actually fit in the mask without a hole, not that she had a very large horn to begin with), heavily padded inside so it wouldn't wobble. What it did, though, was give the impression that she had a giant head. It was also, apparently, extremely hard to move her head with all that extra weight. I tried my very best not to laugh.

Apparently it wasn't even that hard to make either, given how fast Intricate managed to do all that work. Either that or he was some sort of mechanical savant. Probably the second, it was the wasteland after all.

Once I was properly instructed on the use of my new gear (It came with two firing bits now, one for each weapon. Mixing them up would be bad) and a short bit on tactics that I pretended to listen to, we left the tent. “Keep your eyes up,” Unrelenting Will said as we passed the barricade that marked the exit of the camp. “They could be anywhere.”

Part of me wanted to ask where exactly we were going, but I doubted that would have garnered much information, as it was probably already covered in the tactics meeting. Instead, I asked something stupid. “So, your name is Unrelenting Will?”

The larger minotaur looked down at me with a look of confusion before replying with a gruff, “Yes.”

“Are you related to Unbreakable Will?” That was the minotaur I found working for the Mustang water purification plant. Normally, I was bad at remembering names, but that one had stuck with me. The minotaur looked back down at me and nodded slowly.

“How do you know that disgrace?” Oh, well, that wasn't going well at all. “He is supposed to remain unseen. Don't tell me the fool was caught?” I was never going to understand the minotaur's sense of honour.

“Oh, ignore him.” Peace admonished Will. “He and his brother don't get along. Because...” She was swiftly cut off before she could say another word.

“That is none of the outsider's business.” He looked back forward. “Speak no more of it or I'll cut your rations.”

“But then I'll just steal from you, sweetie.” She looked back to me. “He's so grumpy, this fearless leader of ours. Oh. He should have been named Fearless Leader. His father made a mistake in that account, but we all much pay for the sins of thy father, right Will?” The minotaur she was addressing move ahead and

completely ignored us. I got the feel the two of them did this a lot.

Peace Of Mind snorted in response but made no move to continue the conversation, leaving me awkwardly standing between five stoic minotaurs, and one bored filly. “So.” The smallest of the minotaurs addressed me. “I have never seen a pony calf up close before.” He leaned in. “They are quite cute, I must say. Their eyes are so big, I am fairly sure that is what achieves the effect.”

“Foals.” Serenity corrected. “Pony children are called foals. The girls are fillies, and the boys are colts. Ya should really know this.”

“They also seem to be very intelligent and somewhat arrogant...” Intricate Design remarked, which elicited a glare from me. “Oh, I'm just teasing, Miss. Trying to lighten the mood.” No more was said by him, and he fell back into line as we walked.

The more we walked, it seemed, the quieter the group became. By the time we reached the a door in the tunnel wall everyone was dead silent. Even their hoofsteps seemed lighter. The torch flickered in one of the minotaur's hands as Unrelenting Will moved to open the door. He looked to me first, and it took me a second to remember why.

“Oh, right.” I said suddenly and looked at the EFS in my vision. We showed no red, and no amber except the people nearby. “All clear.” Unrelenting Will nodded silently to me and opened the door. Beyond it was almost exactly what I was expecting, a tunnel just like the ones that criss-crossed under Dise (though this one lacked the lighting). From here I would be able to get into Dise, so long as I didn't get lost... yeah, perhaps it was better to do the job and not risk getting shot, then lost.

Peace went next, followed by the twins, Intricate Detail, and finally Serenity and I. It was a nice change to the familiar. The tunnels of Dise had become as much a part of me as the city streets, even though not all memories in the tunnels were good. The darkness did not help the memories either. The last time I walked into darkened tunnels was... unpleasant to say the very least. Sometimes I could still hear words whispered on the wind. When the tunnels under Dise got dark, you didn't stick around, you ran. As I walked, I wondered if I should have listened.

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The tunnels were dark and empty. Each step we took echoed down the hall into the distance. I could hear the tension in the quiet breaths of my companions. Even Unrelenting Will seemed uneasy, his movements awkward and nervous. Serenity, for her part, spent most of the time on my back, hugging me close. The darkened tunnels were worse for her than they were for me, and once again I had dragged her into bitter memories.

Time seemed to slow as we moved along, helped in part by the quietness of my companions. One or twice I saw a flash of red across my vision, but it went away before I could say anything. Even with my EFS, I was still on edge. Every creak could have been the scorpion swarm, every groan could have been a long dead ghoulish searching for prey. Thankfully I found no ghouls, but as for scorpions, it was inevitable. That was what we were here for after all, so I had to expect them. To be ready for them.

I let out a shallow breath as red flashed across my vision. It didn't go away this time. “Stop.” My voice was a whisper. At the word, all the minotaurs stopped and became even more focused, if that was possible. “There's something.” The red blip moved to my right, but it vanished before quickly. “There was something to the right.”

The five of them heaved up their flamethrowers, and I felt myself adjusting mine. Directly to our right was a wooden door, and Unrelenting Will didn't even bother to try and unlock it. From a kick from one of his goat like legs the door fell inward. He peeked his head in and waved his torch around making shadows dance in the gloom. “Nothing,” he said. There was a pause in his voice. “Wait.” He leaned in a bit further, and brought his flamethrower to bear.

I was not expecting the heat to bathe over me the way it did when his weapon sent out a spurt of fire. I recoiled away instinctively, but only for a second. Never did I actually see what it was that he set on fire, but I did see the flames reflecting in the glass of his gas-mask, and his eyes underneath. They were narrowed, and

his brow furrowed. I don't think he knew quite what it was that he was setting on fire, but I think whatever it was needed the fire.

“Let’s keep going.” He said grimly. None of us questioned his actions, or asked what he set on fire. I would like to believe it was just a stray scorpion.

That did nothing to help with the sense of tension in the darkened corridor. Instead it put everyone more on edge. The Minotaurs flanked to either side, with Peace at the back walking backwards, and Intricate Design in the centre of the formation with me.

“Open every door.” Unrelenting Force said as we moved again. “If anything moves burn it.” The tone of his voice was deathly serious, even by his standards. My gut twisted as the next door was kicked open by Peace Of Mind... and then set whatever was beyond on fire. I could hear her gulp when she was finished and step back into line. Nothing more was said, nothing more needed to be said.

“Do you think it's... that... thing?” Serenity asked into my ear.

“No.” It wasn't the orb, we buried that in a tunnel on the other side of Dise. Whatever they were seeing wasn't an illusion, though part of me wished it was. After my encounters with such magic it would be more familiar, more welcoming than whatever this was. “It's just a precaution.” I tried my best to be reassuring.

“Okay...” She said softly. “Are we ever going back there?”

“What?” Unrelenting Glare turned back to me. His eyes were obscured by his mask, and the gloomy light, but I got the feeling he was glaring at me for talking

“Back there... you told... Simple Heart... you said we would get that back. That thing.” The orb, right. I did say that didn't I. “And you normally keep your word...” Yeah, she had to bring my honour into it. My slavery, as a minotaur would put it.

“Yes.” It was my code, and I planned to keep it. Sometimes it was the only thing that made sense. “I'll... probably go alone. You don't need to.”

“Shut up,” Unrelenting Will hissed at us. “Intricate.” He motioned from the small minotaur over to a door in front of us to the right.

“Fine, fine. Make me do all the work. I'm a mechanic, not a soldier you know.” He walked over to the door muttering. “Work work work.” The wooden door creaked open and the minotaur peaked inside. “Hum. What is...” He brought his torch closer and waved it around. “Nothing.” he turned back towards the group. “There's a hole in the floor, but nothing more.” Red flashed on my EFS.

“Watch out.” I said quickly. It came out of nowhere and moved across my EFS indicator faster than it had any right too.

“Huh.” He turns back around. There was a gasp from his mask and he struggled to bring the nuzzle of his flamethrower up.

There was a sickening crunch. A black stinger burst out of the back of Intricate Detail in a spay of blood. His body went limp, but didn't fall. Instead the tail lifted him off the ground and slammed his body into the door frame. By the time he fell from the stinger if he was still alive, it wouldn't last for long. Not with that huge hole in him.

From the door the culprit scuttled out. A rad-scorpion the size of any pony. “Shit!” Peace Of Mind acted first, rushing forward with her flamethrower. The gout of orange fire licked the giant bug making it hiss. It tried to run around, but flame from Unrelenting's weapon blocked it's path. By the time Forward Movement and Forward Thinker added their weapons to the attack the thing was a charred mass of flesh.

“Shit...” Peace Of Mind kicked the charred bug and looked down at Intricate Detail's corpse. She spoke some words in a whisper before leaning down to move his hands over his chest. “We need to keep going.”

“Yes,” Unrelenting Will agreed. “There's a hole in the room,” he said of the room Intricate Detail had tried to

clear. "Go down there." We really were quite crazy, weren't we. This mission was just... insane, in every way. Peace Of Mind nodded and motioned for us to follow her in the room. Whatever the room was before the war, I couldn't really tell. With the only light being the flames, and my pipbuck, it was hard to see the room at all. The only thing I really had eyes for was the hole anyway. I kept staring, looking for signs of red, but I got nothing. When Peace saw that I saw no danger she jumped down into it first, making the room I was in that much darker. By the time the siblings went in, the room was all but dark.

"Hold on tight," I whispered to Serenity. When I felt her hooves tighten around me, I jumped into the dark hole and landed with an echoing thud. It was strange though, just as I landed I thought I heard above me the sound of a flamethrower going off. The creature was dead though, so I wasn't sure what he could be shooting at. And when Unrelenting jumped down beside us, he didn't say anything at all about it.

"This way." The leader strode forward with his torch waving in front of him. He seemed to know where he was going, so we all followed. None of them said a word about the comrade they had just lost. It wasn't necessary, apparently.

When we entered hallway on the other side of the door, I saw the unmistakable sight of a red dot on my EFS. "To the right." I whispered. "Hostiles. One... two... six... eight. Maybe more." I looked down the hallway I said, but it stretched on further than my EFS could read. Unrelenting Will let out long burst of flame down the way I pointed.

The hallways became alive with light and shadows for a second, enough to see that on the other side were maybe a dozen smaller scorpions. At the flames they started to skitter towards us, but when the first few were roasted by flames the rest of them scattered into the darkness.

Unrelenting Will didn't say anything, but he started moving down that hallway so we all followed, more on guard now than ever. Peace walked behind me backwards, her flamethrower perpetually hefted into one hand and pointing wherever she looked, while the siblings walked to either side and sent blast of flame into every doorway we passed, just in case. A few of the times they did that I could hear hissing in pain.

"Are we going the right way?" I asked after a few minutes of eerie silence. It was more to hear my own voice than my actual curiosity. Although, it was a bit odd we jumped down a hole. That couldn't have been in any map.

"Yes," he said hoarsely. There was nothing else to be said, and I was not about to question him further. Just keep walking and hope we survive. It did ruin my plan of running away, though. I didn't really want to get lost in this place.

"Maybe we should have brought a larger force." Five minotaurs and me seemed a bit small for something this crucial. I mean, I was a one pony army, but there were a lot of these bugs.

"Don't you ever shut up?" If he thought I talked a lot, he would never ever want to meet Flare. Or Serenity on sugar. She was very quiet right now (as she often got when things were tense) but on sugar...

Still, at that I shut up. I gathered there was some reason why the squad was so small, and I had a feeling that it had something to do with the minotaurs' sense of honour. Maybe they had committed some crime, and their punishment was this suicide mission. It'd explain why the Minotaur King seemed sure I was going to object to the job. He, of course, made the foolish mistake of thinking I was smart. But I showed him.

A red dot flashed across my vision. I followed it with my eyes so I could get an idea of where it was, and where it was going. I really wished EFS actually showed height. The red blotch on my EFS could be right around the corner, or a floor down, it was impossible to tell. Still, when I noticed it slow and stop on the right, I had to say something. "Next hallway, on the right."

Unrelenting Will grunted a response and motioned for the rest of us to hang back. I wasn't about to argue if he wanted to take on... whatever it was that was on my EFS. He inched forward carefully, and peered around the corner. When he seemed to be satisfied with what he saw he turned into the hallway.

Only to gasp. His torch fell from his hand as his arm shot out suddenly. He gave out a loud grunt and stepped back a few feet letting his foe come into view. It was a rad-scorpion (no surprises there) bigger than the one

that killed Intricate Design. Unrelenting had his hand holding onto the creature's stinger, barely holding it back. When it tried to forget it's stinger and rush forward with it's claws Unrelenting very calmly reached out a hoof and slammed it into the creatures head holding it back.

For all the confidence in his face, I could hear him grunt to try and hold the creature back. It was far too close to use his Flamethrower, which really only left one option.

I slid into SATS and queued up a single shot to the bugs side. When I slipped out of it, Subtlety let out a blisteringly loud roar, and the a hole tore into the creature's side. It let out a pitiful screech before falling silent and motionless.

"What did you do that for!" Unrelenting wiped his bloody hand on his armour before turning to me. "I had it taken care of." Oh, I'm sure he did.

"Trying to speed things up," I remarked dryly eliciting a slight chuckle from Peace.

"Ugh. We must continue to mo-" He stopped mid-word and looked around. "Check your scanner." he must have been talking about my EFS. So I did. Oh...

"Lots more red dots coming this way." I motioned to the hallway the radscorpion Unrelenting fought came from. When I looked around again to double check I noticed something much more distressing. "And a lot coming behind us... like a lot, a lot." Apparently they didn't cull as many as they thought yesterday because in both those directions my EFS was just a solid wall of red.

This left us with one direction. Forward. As it was the way we were going anyway, everyone took off in a sprint. Which for me was a jog, as I didn't want to get too far ahead of them and end up alone. Minotaurs were really slow (and top heavy), but we had enough of a head start that I think we were in the clear. We would be caught up with eventually, but unlike last time I didn't think we'd be completely overrun.

I'm also an idiot.

Instead of giving us enough time to regroup, the massive swarm caught up with us within the minute. I could hear their chattering behind us, and sure enough when I looked back I could see claws starting to appear in the gloom of our torch light. With that incentive I started to run fast, hopefully urging my companions to move faster than they had been. Not that it worked.

"Turn and spray." All at once the four remaining minotaurs turned and let out bursts of flame. "Momma!" Serenity instructed me, so I turned and let my flamethrower go with them. The familiar heat washed over me and I was glad that my barding was fire-proofed. Serenity let out a little squeal and I felt her duck behind me for cover.

The end result was a literal wall of flame stopping the creatures dead, though behind the fire I could see more moving, waiting for the flames to die down. Unrelenting Will grunted at the sight, then turned and hurried down the hallway, eager to put as much distance between us as possible. Part of me wondered why leave at all, we had enough fuel to kill them all. Still, I wasn't about to fight them all on my own so I followed eagerly.

"Their queen has to be around here..." Unrelenting Will grunted back to us. "We're in the heart of their nest." He could say that again. Every direction I looked I saw smatterings of red. Too much to even think about calling out them all. Unless I saw something important.

Like when we reached the end of a hallway, with two doors on either side. One had a solid wall of red behind, the other, only one. "Right." I said quickly. "Left has more scorps."

The lead minotaur grunted and moved to kick the door down, and before he even did all of us moved to go through. I didn't notice until halfway through his kick that there was light pouring through the cracks around the door frame, and being so close to the door made my pipbuck's geiger counter start clicking. Sunlight burst from the now open door into our eyes. After so long in the dim light of torches the light was nearly blinding, but it didn't stop all of us from charging blindly forward.

Of course, I only had one eye that needed to adjust, my other say everything just fine. If I wasn't being

pushed forward by a bunch of large minotaurs I would have stopped and run.

In the centre of the room was the largest scorpion I had ever seen. It could easily outsize a verti-buck (though still smaller than a land shark) and its black carapace seemed to shine in the sunlight. Its two massive claws could have easily cut a pony in two without much effort. As soon as I stopped being pushed I stared so dumbfounded at it I couldn't even comprehend our surroundings.

“Momma... what is...” I could hear the fear in her voice. Right! She needed a place to hide. My gaze was torn away from the giant (now screeching) beast to scan the room.

The first thing I noticed was that the circular room was cut in half. There was a whole section missing and led out into space, and it took me a second to realize what I was seeing. The crater outside Dise that I had seen yesterday, I was in it, well I was right beside it. It managed to destroy the section of tunnel, leaving a gaping hole. All I would need to do was run out that hole and I'd probably fall into the massive crater. Part of me remembered what Flare said yesterday, that strange mutations seemed to happen to things that got too close to it, and I had to wonder if that was what had caused the scorpion to grow so large.

The rest of the room was empty, except for patches of strange black ichor. All along the walls and floor were small holes, large enough for smaller rad scorpions to leave from, but not enough for any of us, not counting Serenity. What it did leave were various piles of rubble around the edge of the room. “Serenity, hide.”

“B-but...” She started to protest but I turned and gave her a look through my mask. It was enough for her to nod and run off to hide behind a pile of rubble, though I was sure I saw her float out her pistol as she ran.

“Forward.” Unrelenting Will commanded. “Try to force it off the edge.” That was actually a good plan. As big as it was I doubted it could survive the fall, and it was much easier than trying to kill it normally due to the fact it was really fucking huge.

The five of us made a semi-circle and all at once let out matching jets of fire. The creature let out a hideous shriek in pain and recoiled from the flames. As it did, I felt the tension in my stomach lift. Maybe we could actually kill this monstrous thing. It was backing up the way we wanted. All together we took a step forward, and the wall of fire made it recoil more, inching closer to the edge.

We could actually win this, I could actually do this. After so many failures I had a chance to do something good. To start making up for the past. Sure it was going to help the minotaurs, but I had heard stories of radscorpions infesting the tunnels under Dise, and have seen it for myself on multiple occasions. If this could help stop them, halt their growth, it would be something. Maybe only a little thing, but dammit I deserved to be proud of something. I needed to prove to myself that I could do it, I could change the way my life was heading. I just needed to push a little further.

The creature crawled back more, hissing in pain. I could smell charred meat, and see smoking rising from the the great beast's black shell. I licked my lips and pressed forward again, ignoring the intense heat scalding at my armour. Just a little further. Just a little.

Forward Movement's flamethrower took that moment to sputter out of fuel, leaving a gap in flame wall. Before any of us had a chance to respond the giant beast's tail snapped.

When I turned my head in shock towards the sound I saw the Minotaur impaled on the beast's spiny tail. He made a weak gurgle before falling limp. The tail was torn out of the corpse in a spray of blood and entrails that made my stomach turn.

“NO!” Forward Thinker shouted. The two of them were so quiet I had almost forgotten they could talk at all, and more importantly I forgot they were siblings.

“Get back in line!” Unrelenting Will tried to order, but the cow didn't listen. She dropped her flamethrower and rushed to her brother's corpse. I understood; if it had been my brother (as much as we disagreed) I might have acted similarly, but it left a gap in our wall. It gave us an increasing chance of failure. It-

Something cracked into me and I was pushed over tumbling onto my side.

With a groan of pain, I brought a hoof to my chest, but winced away when I touched it. It was like someone

had set my side on fire. There were shouts around me, and the sound of the creature moving far too fast. When I looked up I saw it towering over Forward Thinker.

The cow looked up at the beast, and to her eternal credit, reached for her backup rifle and even managed to get off a single shot. It was too little too late. The radscorpion queen's claw moved forward and, with sickening ease, cut the minotaur in half.

“Shit.” I muttered as I struggled to my hooves. I didn't have time for panic, or worry. All I could do was fight, and try to *survive*.

I fired Subtlety into the side of the beast, and when the bullet tore a chunk from it's shell it let out a frightful screech. It distracted the beast that Will and Peace (who had been pushed to the other side of the beast) were able to light it up it's side with their flamethrowers.

The queen did not die though. I shot it three more times in the side, and still it just refused to die. To the contrary it swung it's massive claw through the jets of fire into the two minotaurs. The fire was cut short and I saw the two slam into a wall. The scorpion's tail turn to the now defenceless minotaurs, and looked ready to fight.

So I stopped time.

I slid into SATS And lined out a shot at tip of the queen's tail. When I came out of the pipbuck's spell Subtlety fired. The bullet ripped into the tail, not cutting off the end but leaving a massive hole. The creature once again screeched in pain, and the pause allowed the two minotaurs time to move away from the creature.

Unfortunately the only way the two could retreat was closer to the edge where the room was cut off by the crater. “Shit.” I dimly heard Unrelenting Will growl as he banged his claw against this side of his Flamethrower. He dropped the weapon and pulled out his assault rifle.

The bull let out a spray of bullets at the back of the scorpion as it moved to turn around. Perhaps this was our chance. It was big, but slow, and maybe.... I moved forward, blasting at its side with my flamethrower. Peace too used her still-working flamethrower to char at the areas that Unrelenting was shooting at. We still had a chance. Even three members down, and in pain from the beast's attacks, we could still come out on top. We just had to push a little bit harder.

I fought through the pain (not enough time to grab a med-x) and moved forward as fast as I could. The fire from my weapon sprayed across the side of the creature's shell, burning and melting as it did so. The heat that washed over me was intense, but I kept pressing into the attack. I could survive a few small burns, so long as we survived this. So long as I could get Serenity out alive.

Then the stupid thing had to do something unexpected. It started backing up, really fast.

Without even bothering to turn around it charged blind into the heat and gunfire. Peace Of Mind was swift enough to dodge, but Unrelenting Will was hit hard and sent stumbling back towards the edge. He seemed to regain his balance just as he was balancing on the edge of the room.

Then a piece of the floor gave out on him. He slipped, his back slammed into the corner of the edge before he rolled off the side. Not completely though. I could barely see that he managed to grab on to the edge with his claw.

“Will!” Peace didn't drop her flamethrower, or stop praying, but she did edge towards where he hung. Maybe if I distracted the thing she'd have a chance.

So I fired Subtlety into it's side until I had to reload. It seemed to work. The creature turned to me and screeched out in pain. As it started walking towards me I noticed it seemed unsteady, and ichor dripping from innumerable wounds. We were wearing it down. Just a little longer and maybe we could get it to bleed out. I lowered my bruised body and let out a spray of fire from my battle saddle.

“Fight me!” I yelled at it, really hoping to keep its attention more than anything. I bit down harder and let another blast of fire wash over the creature. It seemed to balk and give me time to look over to see how the minotaurs were doing.

Not good, as it turned out. Peace had managed to grab Unrelenting's hand and was struggling to pull him up, but she wasn't having much luck. As much as she grunted and pulled, he wasn't coming over the edge, and she didn't look like she was about to back down.

Crack.

The floor they were on shook for a second. Then it broke. One second the two minotaurs were there struggling to get back into the room, the next they were gone. Vanished. Dimly I thought I heard a distant thud of landing far below, but I couldn't be sure.

My head turned back to the giant scorpion that was now renewing its effort to kill me. The fight had started with five of us, and I was the only one left. In such a short time. Fuck. Fuckity fuck. My eyes darted to the entrance of the room. Screw this mission. Screw this radscorpion queen. I was done. I let out a final blast of fire to warn the queen away, then turned.

“Serenity!” I started to move towards Serenity had hidden, “We need to get out of he-” A sharp pain made my words die in my throat and turn into a muffled scream.

My head turned back, towards the pain. The burning sensation like fire under my skin. My leg. My left hind-leg was pierced through by a black stinger. My body froze in place. I couldn't move, I could barely comprehend the sensation. I wanted to laugh, to cry, to scream, but all actions failed me.

Until I was lifted into the air by my impaled leg, and I was able to truly understand the enormity of the situation I was in. Looking down I could see myself rising higher above the ground. I panicked, my legs kicking wildly as I tried to dislodge myself. It didn't work. Nothing seemed to work. I kept flailing, but I was still in so much pain, and still hanging about to die. It was only when the queen started to lower me within range of one of her giant claws that I saw my chance.

The hole I had blown in tail earlier. There was a huge chunk missing, and it looked weak. Maybe... I kicked my free hind leg at the wound. The creature gave a hiss, but I was still moving towards the claw. Another kick. I was in between the two parts of the claw, and it was about to snap shut. There was no time for panic, or fear. All I could do was kick with all my might and pray that Celestia was merciful.

She was. The kick snapped the end tail off, and I fell.

I landed head first in a heap on the ground with the claw snapping above me. My whole body was wracked with pain, but I was alive. Somehow, against all odds. As the scorpion scurried away backwards I moved to get back to my hooves. There was still time. We could still escape.

For some reason I fell when I tried to stand. I couldn't understand it. Why was I falling, what happened. Why did my leg stop hurting so much. My eyes scanned the room, maybe I tripped, maybe. My brain wasn't working, and my eyesight was getting blurry. How could this...

My leg. I saw it. It was lying on the ground a few feet away with the barbed stinger still in it. Why was it over there? It was bleeding. Was I bleeding? It didn't make any sense. Why could I think. What had... my eyes fell to my hind leg... to where my hind leg was supposed to be, but it wasn't there anymore. It was cut off at middle, leaving only a bloody stump. So much blood. It was already pooling around me. My leg it was...

Gone. Cut off. How could this... how...

“MOMMA WATCH OUT!”

My bleary eyes looked up. The Scorpion was mad. Charging at me. Oh. I was going to die anyway. It seemed funny. After everything. I would die like this. Part of me wanted to laugh, but I had misplaced my voice.

“NO!”

A light pink field enveloped the scorpion. It started screaming. In pain. At least it moved its mouth like it was, I couldn't hear anything. The creature started flailing. And backing up. Serenity was doing... something to it. It slammed into the door we used to get into the room.

“Momma shoot it!” Shoot. With...? Right... My gun...

I still had Subtlety. I could still survive. So I struggled to my three legs. My vision was blurry though. And I couldn't stand straight. But I had to shoot. To...

So I slipped into SATS. Time stopped and the fog over my brain was lifted. I aimed a shot with the targeting system right at the creature's eye. The bullet tore into it, and it cried out in pain. I was still wobbly, and it wasn't dead. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw Serenity firing her gun too, but it was hard to tell. Sounds seemed so muted.

When SATS recharged I went into it again and fired another shot. This time it didn't scream. It didn't fight. It just slumped over. Dead. Please let it be dead. Not that I could check. As soon as it fell I did too. I was losing blood. I seemed to be fading. Part of me said I needed to *survive*, but the rest said I've done enough today, and I had to sleep.

It seemed like a smart voice, I thought as the world greyed around me. Sleep seemed nice.

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“Where am I?!” The light was burning my eyes, and I could hardly see. “Where?!” My hooves were strapped down. That was silly. I could lie down just fine on my own.

“Sweetie,” A familiar voice called out in the blinding light. “Calm down.” When my eyes adjusted I saw I recognized the voice. She was a friend of Mamma, but I could never remember her name. Wait. Momma.

“Momma!” I screamed. “What happened...? Where...?” The memories were blurry. The last thing I remember was that olive stallion. He had a gun. There was a lot of pain. So much pain. And momma was bleeding. I tried to save her. Did I? Had I managed to save her? “Is she... can I see her? Please...”

*Momma, please. You have to be alright.*

The mare shook her head. What was her name? “I'm... I'm so sorry sweetie she... she didn't make it.” Didn't make it. She was... oh... I was a stupid foal, but even I knew what that meant.

“I...” I wanted to cry, to feel sad, but I couldn't. I just felt... numb.

They were talking to me, I saw their mouths moving, and I heard the sounds, but they didn't become words in my head. Just... sounds. Meaningless, abstract. The ponies in front of me, I knew them, but not their names. They made pointless sounds, they tried to sound reassuring, but it meant nothing. Just noise. So I didn't pay attention. When I asked about my brother they made more noises, comforting noises, but still useless. All that mattered was that he was gone. Forever they said. Their noises couldn't stop that.

*You have to live... I can't lose you... please... I can fix it...*

They had to be lying. I decided this with sincerity. They were lying to me. Momma couldn't be dead. Brother couldn't be gone. I tried to move, but they stopped me. They said I was shot. With a bullet. Another lie. Bullets were deadly, momma always said, and I was alive. I squirmed in their strangle hold, and eventually they let me go.

I stood up on the ground. My body was sore, but like the noises they made it didn't mean anything. I walked out, into the open. It was raining outside. Cold rain on my coat. Momma always said should stay inside when it rained, but I had to go out. I had to find her. They were lying, and I had to find momma. So it was okay to be out in the rain.

My legs carried me without thinking. Towards where it happened. When I found the bullets, where Momma was... where I would find Momma alive. She had to be there. She wouldn't leave me, she would never leave me because I needed her and she loved me. She always loved me. Just a little bit further and I would find her waiting for me.

*Bang Bang Bang*

The memory of the bullet hit me. The pain in my chest, the struggle to move. Maybe they weren't lying about that part, maybe the noise was right... but then maybe they were right about momma too. How could I know. I had to see. So I ignored the memory, and ignored the pain, and kept walking to where I knew I would find momma.

Tears stung my eyes but I wasn't sure why. Everything felt numb, except the tears. They were real, they meant something even though everything felt meaningless.

I saw it. The building we were supposed to scavenge. It wasn't empty though, there was a red ball lying there in the grey rain. Why... as I walked closer I saw Cakewalk... or Wildfire, whatever her name was. She was crying too. Curled up in a ball, she was crying. Even though I think she was asleep.

I walked up to her and looked over her. She was a small filly. Such a small filly, and she was crying, but why? I was too dumb, and I couldn't figure it out. I leaned down and nosed at her cheek, but she just whined and turned her head away. She needed to wake up, if she slept out here she was going to get a cold. How could I wake her up though?

*Boom*

I blinked my eye in confusion and looked around. Was that an explosion... no. It must have been my imagination. But whatever it was Wildfire heard it too because she was sitting up now, her eyes bloodshot red and staring at me. "You... you did this." She sniffled. "Daddy... he was protecting you and your stupid mother!" She was yelling at me, but I understood those noises. What she meant. She was angry.

"I'm sorry..." I choked up, the words hurt to speak. "What happened..."

"They shot him... daddy... because..." She started to cry again. "Leave me alone. I want... I want to be alone." No... her daddy was alive. Along with my mom. She just had to believe.

"You'll catch a cold... lets go... back... you don't want a cold." I tried to tell her, but the words came out slow and awkward. It was cold and wet, and she would get sick. We could wait for them inside Marefort. Wait for our parents to come back.

"No..." She stood up aggressively. "Leave me alone! I-" She was being silly. So before she could finish talking, I picked her up onto my back and started walking towards Marefort. "What are you doing?! Put me down!"

I didn't, and when I didn't respond to her, she returned to her quiet sobbing. She shouldn't cry, it was just going to make her more wet. And it was raining so we were already wet enough. I couldn't blame her though, I was crying too. Not as much. She cried more.

I walked her through the gloom of the rainy evening and into Marefort. I paused right before the door to decide. Part of me wanted to go my house, but... but I wanted Wildfire to be comfortable. She was the sick one, or she was going to be. So instead I started walking towards the ramp that led to the second level. I remembered the way, I had ran up that way being chased by my brother earlier that day. It seemed so long ago. Like it happened to another pony. A younger one.

I reached the top of the stairs. There were so many stairs in Marefort, and it wore me down, and it took a long time. As I walked ponies spoke to me, noises in the back of my head. I couldn't hear them, not their words, so I didn't acknowledge them. Instead I kept carrying Wildfire up and up. To where her home was at the highest point in the mess that was Marefort.

By the time I reached the top I heard snoring. Wildfire, she was asleep on my back. She cried herself to sleep, that seemed nice.

*Is she gunna wake up?*

*I don't know... give her time.*

I opened the door to her house, and realized I had never been there before. It was really small, much smaller

than my house. There was only a single room, with a table in the centre, and two beds on either side of it. There was no way of knowing which bed was hers so I walked over to the closest and placed her on it as gently as I could. I was dumb, but strong. Everypony in Marefort agreed on that.

When she was safely on the bed I pulled the blanket up and tucked it in tight like Momma used to do to me. That would stop her from getting sick. I was sure of it.

When that was done I... didn't know what to do. I had to go search for Momma, but I didn't want to leave Wildfire. She might have been sick. Very sick, she was outside in the rain for so long. So... Momma could wait. She'd still be there. I would look the next day. There was a free bed so I walked towards it.

"Silver..." Wildfire said groggily. I must have woken her up. If everything wasn't so numb I might have felt bad. "Your cutie-mark."

But I didn't have a cutie-mark. I was a late bloomer, momma always said. When I looked at my flank to confirm... I was wrong. My cutie-mark was there. Three brown rocks... that meant something, though I wasn't sure what. It was too hard to think.

Instead I fell into the second bed, and went to sleep. I could figure out what my cutie-mark after I found Momma. She would know. She knew everything, and she would always be there for me. Always...

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I woke up to the sound of my pipbuck clicking. My eyes opened and the dream faded. My cutie-mark, three brown rocks. I never did figure out what it meant, anymore than I found my dead mother.

"You're awake?" A muffled voice asked.

"Yes I-" I froze when I looked up. A big, with glowing eyes. The Scorpion queen. It was talking to me! It was!

It was just a mask. My mind figured it out slowly. A helmet, armour. Enclave armour, I knew it. The enclave had found me. "Calm down." Now the enclave was telling me to calm down. I didn't feel calm. I felt sore, and groggy, and... alive. I was alive. How was.

My eyes looked around the room. The corpse of the giant scorpion was lying in front of the door, with a blown out wall beside it. And... more scorpions, three small ones littered the nearby room. What had happened. How much had I missed? My eye fell to my leg, my back one. To see what was left.

To my surprise there were robotics there, not very complex robotics, but since my leg was cut below the hock, they didn't need to be. Serenity must have done that... and...

"What... what happened?" My voice was a whisper, and even that was painful.

"You," the Enclave said to me, "almost died. Seems to happen a lot to you. You're lucky your daughter here--" Serenity! I looked around and found her hugging me in her sleep. She looked... almost peaceful. "Is so damn amazing. She managed to stop your blood loss and make a quick replacement leg. I'm sure House will get you a new one." My daughter. She was amazing. So amazing. I needed to give her candy. So much candy.

"Who... Flare?"

"The very same." The Enclave pegasus nodded.

"What... how did you find me... why are you... wearing that?" Why did it hurt so much.

"Pipbuck tags. It made you easy to locate, hard to find.... As for the armour," he sighed, "It blocks radiation, and there's a lot to block. As soon as you're ready we're heading back to Dise. Mr. House will want to see you and... and you'll want to see what happened." Back to Dise. To see the fallout of my mistakes.

I didn't want to see it, but it was something I had to face.

Level Up!

Skill Note: Guns 100!

New Perk: Monster Hunter: Hunting down giant creatures takes a certain type of pony. You gain +10% against all mutated wildlife, and 24% poison resistance. As if you weren't completely immune already.

((A/N: Is this thing on? It is! Hi, I'm No One and yes, I do still exist. It has been a hectic few months and I am terribly sorry for the lack of updates. A little while back I lost my job and between that and fighting to get EI [so as to buy food and other lovely things] I sort of went into a depressive state which made writing extremely difficult. I'm still unemployed, but I got EI, and I've been feeling better so with any luck I'll provide you, my fabulous readers, with more sub-par post-apocalyptic pony goodness. Thank you so much for your patience.

I would like to thank Kkat for creating fallout Equestria, as well as my current editors who make this stuff readable: theBSDude, Menti, and Julep. I would also like to thank my friends on the FOE:IRC who have helped me through this difficult time by being awesome people. And finally I would like to thank my faithful readers. If you're still reading this after two paragraphs of wangst you must have a strong will and kind heart. ~No One~))

## *Chapter 26: Zero Point*

*"Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."*

"How long can we sit here, huddled in darkness, dying of radiation and starving for food, before we must rise up? How long can we let the aptly named 'gangs' hoard the food, water, and medicine we need to survive? When the balefire erupted over the city, their first thought was to shoo us to the unprotected tunnels, while they hide in their towers, drinking rad-away like water. They do not share their wealth, or their food, or their medicine, but leave our children to die of sickness and disease. If ever there was a time to rise up and take our city back, it is now!" I had to admit, the speech hit enough emotional aspects that it almost made me sympathize with her.

Almost. Not only were there a few inconsistencies (underground was not radiation-proof, but most certainly more radiation-proof than buildings on the surface), I was also suspicious of the rant because I knew the pony speaking: one Righteous Song of Celestia's Vision. Unless there was another white pony with a rising sun as a cutie-mark. She was standing on a soapbox in a crowded tunnel while followers gathered to listen to her. Not many stayed, I noticed, and most of the 'crowd' just paused in front of her for a moment before moving on.

"We have fed Dise, and these gang leaders, with our caps, with our livelihoods, and with our blood. Is this how we should be repaid?" Though, I did have a feeling her following would grow as things got worse.

Flare and I moved away from the commotion down a smaller tunnel, but it too was crowded. It seemed all of Dise flooded the tunnels (although Flare said only the top levels of tunnels were crowded, and everything below was still empty.). Once the megaspell had gone off and the streets were awash with radiation, the gangs of Dise threw out all but the most vital employees, and left the rest of the citizens to retreat underground.

There were whispers of the riots that took place. How, when some citizens had been denied access to the gang-controlled entrances to the tunnels (the entrance I'd used to get underground was actually secret, so most did not look there, and instead to the entrances held by the various gangs), they had fought back in short but bloody battles. Rumor was that, when fires broke out, Ponitrons came to quell the fighting, but were beaten down and stripped for parts.

Of course the madness hadn't lasted long, as the threat of radiation drove everypony quickly off the streets. Not that the tunnels were the best place to go. I could still hear my pipbuck ticking slowly as I walked the tunnels, proof of the ever-present threat. Overnight, rad-away and rad-x became worth their weight in gold.

Surprisingly, the first thing Flare did after rescuing me was feed me two rad-aways. Apparently, by the time he arrived for his dramatic rescue, Serenity was already very ill, and getting worse (despite fending off a few scorpions as I was unconscious), but I was doing much better because my larger body type was more resilient to the radiation. Still, it was a testimony to how badly rad-away was going to be needed in the coming days.

At least the journey through the scorpion tunnels to the part where ponies actually lived was mostly uneventful. On his way in, Flare'd had to fight his way through, and since he'd blown up everything in his path, it left us with a mostly safe (and easy to follow) way out. Which was good because my makeshift hind leg was both incredibly painful and very awkward to walk on.

Of course, considering the circumstance in which Serenity made the leg, it was basically a work of art. My mind couldn't even really comprehend the work she must have done on my leg to make it even able to be used with the prosthetic, never mind the fact it was all done while in a hostile area, being irradiated and attacked by scorpions. Once she woke up I was going to buy her as much candy as I could find.

"Watch it!" Somepony growled when I bumped into them, which broke me out of my contemplative stupor.

"Huh, I..." I wasn't sure who'd said it because the tunnel was a mess of ponies, and when I looked back the pony was gone. The tunnels may have been made for the entire city, but they were only utilizing one one

hundredth of the tunnels' actual size.

“Don't bump into ponies.” Flare looked back at me. Not that he had much of a problem running into ponies; everypony saw his Enclave attire and gave him a wide berth, though this was accompanied with a lot of dirty looks.

“I have a new leg. Not my fault...” I lifted up my makeshift hind leg and looked back at it. It... wasn't pretty, but it worked enough to walk. If you considered awkwardly limping around walking.

“At least you lost it for a noble cause. Like a true hero,” Flare said as he turned his head back forward. I groaned at the word and tried to put it out of my mind. The last thing I needed was more over-thinking about what it meant to be a hero. “That's only partially sarcasm: those rad-scorpions were a menace. Have been for year; with so many ponies migrating into the 'safety' of the tunnels you probably saved a lot of lives by removing the source. I had a friend who tried the same thing a long time ago...” His voice was... strange, almost sad, but it was hard to tell through the voice filter. “He never did come back...”

Flare stopped to lower his head for a second before suddenly walking again at an increased pace that I could hardly keep up with. That is to say I couldn't keep up with him at all, especially not with the other ponies walking the other direction and blocking him from view. I thought I was able to see him far ahead of me in the crowded corridor until I found myself in a large room that was apparently set up as a miniature market and he was completely gone.

With Serenity... normally the filly would be riding on my back, but after the fighting I was too worried about falling and dropping her, so I had let him carry her. Lovely.

With a grunt of annoyance (and pain, even with med-x my body stung), I tried to stand up taller and stretch my neck out to see better. It didn't really work, and made me look something like a fool, which I found appropriate. With that attempt a failure, I tried to push my way through the crowd. Hopefully he would notice I was gone and listen for the yells of 'watch where you're going', and find me again. Normally I could navigate the tunnels myself, but it looked different filled with ponies.

As I was looking over at one of the many stands set up (it was actually selling rad-away, and was guarded by five fully armoured and armed earth ponies), I noticed something bump into me. At first I thought it was just another pony attracted to my clumsiness until they said something other than 'excuse you' or 'watch it'.

“Um, excuse me. Are you a Hizai?” The words made my heart jump for a second. Because I was a Hizai, and apparently Mr. House, my employer, kicked ponies out of his hotel to fend for themselves, as he hogged rad-away for himself (well, he was a ghou, so he would have been hogging it for his employees. Though the effect was the same.)

“Uh.” I managed to turn slightly to the speaker, a diminutive purple mare with a short cropped yellow mane. “I'm, uh.”

“Cause, um, if you are,” she started, looking nervous, “I was just wondering... you see. My daughter's really sick... and I don't have any rad-away. And I heard the gangs, that they had a lot. And if you could spare some.” She gulped and looked at the ground.

“Of course she's not a Hizai, stupid mare,” an older mare said from the crowd nearby. “No Hizai would have that shabby of a leg.” The older mare waved in the direction of my new hind leg. With a huff, she vanished into the crowd, her grumpiness apparently spent.

“Oh, right.” The purple mare nodded her head in realization. “Yes. I'm sorry. I'll just... I didn't mean to bother you... please forgive me.” She gulped nervously and took a step back. “It's just... my daughter... and... I... I need to go, I'm so sorry for bothering you.” She quickly backed up, running rump-first into a confused stallion. This led to more apologizing and running off into the crowd -- where she no doubt ran into and apologized at more confused strangers.

I watched her leave for a few seconds before she was lost in the sea of ponies, then let out a sigh. Maybe I could convince Mr. House to use some of his rations to help the ponies down here. Radiation was seeping in, and it was only time before ponies started dying, and when that happened they'd get even more desperate.

“Hired.” Flare was beside me so suddenly that I nearly jumped. “You're really easy to find in a crowd, you know that? In battle, you must be the equivalent of shooting the broad side of a barn.” That'd explain how I kept getting shot... in the face. Of course if I was a barn, it'd have to be a high durability barn made by Stable Tec or something.

“Sorry.” I looked over to him to find his rather creepy bug eyes staring at me. “You started walking too fast.”

“Sorry, I forgot about your pegleg.” He snorted. “Now let's get a move-on before somepony recognizes you and starts to wonder if Hizai keep rad-away in their blood.” Ponies would have a harder time recognizing me if he didn't say stuff like that out loud.

So I didn't bother answering him and tried to pretend that I didn't know him. Of course, this was a mite difficult as I was still following him through the throngs of tired and sick ponies. I knew Dise had a lot of ponies in it, but it was very different seeing them all packed together.

Over on the wall of the tunnel we were walking down, I noticed that someone had painted the words 'We're dying' and 'We don't have to' in red paint, followed by the word 'Unite' in green below it. It was an eerie green, the last word, almost sickly. More than anything though, it reminded me of the jade explosion that erupted over the city. I could still see it when I closed my eyes, still feel the shock wave thudding against my chest. The colour, I was sure, was no accident.

Not that it was the only thing written on the walls, it was simply the brightest and most coherent. It seemed the public airing of grievances had been taken to the walls of the tunnels. Perhaps as a way to pass the time, or maybe because they were afraid of saying certain things out loud for fear of who might be listening. Or maybe I was just thinking way too much about graffiti.

It wasn't long before we pushed past the thickest concentration of ponies, and managed our way to what was apparently the exit. It wasn't the one I was used to, and it was heavily guarded by a trio of battle-saddle-wearing ponies. Of course, I still had that flamethrower so I could have wiped the floor with them if I wanted.

“Stop right there,” one of the three said. “What's your business on the surface? I mean, other than the fact you're clearly retarded and want to die.”

Flare took a step toward the mare and used a hoof to point at his black enclave armour. He replied dryly, “Take a wild guess.”

“Fashion parade?” was the guard mare's answer.

“Enclave, I have business with my commander.”

“Oh yes, how could I forgot what you tossers look like. Pardon me.” She seemed agitated. To put it lightly. “Celestia forbid I deny any of you anything, you'd shoot me down with one of your laser guns or something.” She looked over at me. “What's the big bitch for, target practice?”

“Yes,” Flare replied.

“Good enough.” She turned her head to the guard closest to the door. “Let them through.” She looked back at us, “Don't blame me if you stay up too long and come back all ghoulished.”

“What was that all about?” I asked Flare as we went through the door into the dark corridor beyond. On the other side of the hallway I could see a set of stairs, and light peeking through. I tried to ignore the fact my pipbuck seemed to tick faster the closer we got to the door. “That 'Enclave laser gun thing',” I clarified.

“Oh, that.” He kept walking, but I saw his head lowered. “Well, I've mentioned that things have been changing rapidly.” Yes, he had mentioned that... “Well, ever since that whole 'sunshine and rainbows' thing, ponies got all excited about the Enclave. Not the Dise Enclave, but the one that's still in the sky, started something of a civil war.”

“I assume this is going somewhere,” I said as we started up the stairs, my pipbuck clicking faster by the second.

“Yes, yes. Just listen. So there was a civil war,” Flare explained as he opened the door to reveal a small dirty room with only one exit on the far side. “The Enclave use clouds to grow food, you know, and with only so much saved up and less farmable land there were food riots, and factions breaking off, and other lovely things like that. Apparently the pony who cleared the skies thought it was better that ponies on the ground could see the sun than it was for pegasi to eat.”

“Right.” I wasn't really smart enough to question that logic, but it did seem a little bit strange.

“High General Steel Wing, the current ruler of the Enclave Remnants, the ponies that I work for,” I was a little bit insulted that he felt he needed to remind me of that, “has been in touch with one of these factions for a while.” Flare walked over to the door on the other side of the room and pushed it open. “Now we're aligned with them and we've acquired... well, see for yourself.” He seemed to be looking at something off in the distance and when I stepped out to see what he was looking at I gasped. “Welcome to Dise.”

Off in the distance, floating over the apartment structure to the south-west was, well it was, er, it was something. It was a large structure that looked like a cross between a boat and a thundercloud, only many times the size of a vertibuck, and loaded with what had to be giant cannons. Flying around it were many black-armoured pegasi illuminated by the setting sun, as well as more vertibucks than the Remnants had had before, and a few other flying machines I didn't really understand.

“That, is a Raptor Nacreous. It was partially knocked to the ground when the rainbooms that cleared the sky went off, but it was flying low and the damage was able to be repaired.” He sounded a little bit proud of the giant thing. It scared me though. If the Remnants had completely dominated the skies about Dise before, now their hold was unshakeable. How long would it take for them to decide to just take the city, and when that happened who could possibly stop them.

Not that there was much of a city left to conquer. As I stepped onto the Dise streets, I heard... nothing. There were no sounds of ponies talking and laughing amongst each other. There was not even any of the ever-present music drifting from the casinos onto the street. All there was to hear was a harsh wind whipping through the tall buildings, and the loud clicking of my pipbuck.

There were so few lights. Normally there would be bright lights shining from every window and sign. Great beacons that proudly proclaimed that this wasn't a mere wasteland settlement. It was a city like those of old: proud of its accomplishments and more than willing to shove them in your face. Now it seemed dead... or deader. Without the noise and the lights, I could really get a good look at the city.

Its tall buildings were in disrepair, many close to falling over, and even the well-maintained ones looked skeletal. The paved road was cracked and shattered in places in ways I hadn't noticed before, and the great neon signs seemed cracked and half-hanging on. Overall it was lonely. A great expanse of buildings and roads and walkways, now all empty but for us. Well, there were some lights peeking out from the four major casinos, but they seemed paltry compared to what it had been.

Between the raptor flying menacingly overhead and the deserted streets, I barely felt like I knew the city at all. Everything was changing too quickly for me to keep up, and it was my fault.

Well, not really. It was true that I had failed to stop what had happened (and that my failure was impressive), but I hadn't caused it, had I? Dragonslayer, and whoever he was working for, had done it. Maybe I failed to stop him, but it was still his plans, his hooves. This wasn't another Karkhoof, where I was the pony who set the town on fire; I had only failed to stop him. This was his doing, not mine. All of this. And if I ever met him again, I'd tear off his leg and beat him with it.

When I met him again. I was positive that once I told Mr. House what I had learned, he'd fit me up with a new leg and send me out after him. It was a long time coming, and that bastard deserved it.

“Silver.” Flare was a few feet ahead of me. “Hurry up. You're unprotected like that, and so is Serenity.” That was all I needed to get me going at a really quick pace. Despite the fact she was still wearing that black fireproof sheet (though she'd taken off the gas mask), she wasn't protected much from radiation.

“How will The B.S... er, Black Salamander.” Flare probably wouldn't know of my internal shortened version of the Hotel's name. “How will it be, you know, safe.”

“Well,” Flare said as he quickened his pace, “ever hear of a Spell In a Box?”

“A... what?” My knowledge of magic was... paltry at best. The most I knew was that when my shoulder burned magic was around. “Is it like... when you enchant a box?”

“Sort of.” He said as we neared the hotel. “I’m not a unicorn, so I’m no expert on magical whatists, but from my understanding it’s a spell you put into a box that goes off either when triggered, or when certain conditions are met. Really advanced stuff, or so I’m told. The point is that after that whole apocalypse thing, Mr. House put a lot of work into thinking about how to use a box’o’spell to help if something like that were to happen again.”

“Mr. House is an earth pony,” I said. Given he was an earth pony, all the thoughts in the world wouldn’t cast a spell.

“Doesn’t mean he’s dumb. He happened to know quite a few unicorns, and some of them turn all ghoulished with him. Blah blah blah. He used anti-radiation magic, which exists but in too small an area to normally be useful, put it into a box, put the box in the wall of his hotel and BAM. It sucks up radiation before it gets in. Takes a lot of them I hear, and he sold the idea to the other hotels, it’s how he got a lot of his post-war wealth. I think. I may be making some of this up, but generally that’s how it works.”

“If there’s a spell that cleans radiation. Why is it still around?” I had to ask, because that part made no sense to me at all.

“There’s less than there was. Anyway, it takes a lot of energy to clear a small space, and it seeps in from infected areas eventually. The spell-o-boxes won’t last for more than a few weeks at most.” Then everypony above would have to retreat, too. At least it was a little bit of hope.

With my pipbuck still ticking, I decided I had spent far too much time in deadly radiation and increased my hobbling speed to The BS’s door. Flare reached it first and was already knocking by the time I walked up to it. “Open up,” he said loudly. “I said open. O-P-E-N.”

There was a long, worrying pause when there was no answer from the beyond the door, but eventually a voice spoke over the intercom beside the entrance. “Who is it?”

“It’s Flare. *Captain* Flare of the Enclave Remnants. I’m under orders to bring back one of your Hizai who got caught outside after the blast,” Flare said through the door. “So you really should open. We have a civilian out here without protection.”

“Designation?” The voice replied, irritatingly calm.

“Star-Mare!” I yelled through the door. “My designation is Star-Mare.”

There was an even longer pause before the voice before the voice spoke up again. “Ah, you. Mr. House had been waiting for you...” Well that sounded ominous. “One second, disengaging emergency door.” There was a loud clangour from the other side of the wooden door for what seemed like hours (though probably only a minute) before the door finally opened. “Well, come in,” the voice said.

I shoved Flare through the door and followed quickly, and before the door could even fully close behind me, something suddenly hugged me around the neck. “Star Mare!”

“What! What!” I took a step back, dragging along the mare who hugged me. “Oh.” I realized it was the strangely perky and affectionate Tight Lips.

“Hah! And here I was betting that you were dead. Serves me right, I made the same bet last time you vanished off the face of the wasteland you know.” She winked at me. “You’ll simply have to share your stories over a drink.” That was not going to happen. “But you have things to do first no doubt, and I’m simply positive that Mr. House will want to see you. Because he told me he wanted to see you. I’m intuitive like that.” She chuckled to herself and took a few steps back. “So, welcome back to The Black Salamander.”

She waved a hoof to the casino floor, and to my surprise it was different. The slot machines were pushed together with poker tables on top to make makeshift shacks, and the pit in the centre of the floor was filled with supplies of all sorts. And ponies, the entire place was completely crowded with ponies, even more than

it was when all the NCA ponies were getting cybernetics.

“I thought the gang leaders didn't take in any city ponies...” That's what I heard in the tunnels anyway.

“Oh, Mr. House didn't.” Tight Lips seemed amused with my mistake. “Most of these ponies work for Mr. House, or are family to ponies who did. He kept most of his employees in rooms upstairs, but when the bomb went off he moved them down here. That way the spells that keep the place radiation free are more contained and will last longer. The first few floors of hospital and research are protected too, but anything above isn't. Mr. House is still in his room because ghouls love that radiation stuff!”

That all actually made a lot of sense. And while Tight Lips said all these ponies worked for Mr. House, I wasn't sure. Maybe Mr. House had a heart under that decomposing flesh after all.

“Doctor!” My mind snapped back. “Serenity, my daughter.” Tight Lips looked over my back and looked over the sleeping filly with an almost grim look. As grim as Tight Lips ever looked.

“You sure have her dolled up, but that wouldn't protect against radiation. I'll get her into a cleansing right away.” She gave out a sharp whistle and a pony came running up from somewhere in the casino shanty town. He quickly helped Serenity Flare's back, and carried her off to the doctors floor. I didn't look away from my filly until she passed out of view from between a set of double doors.

“She'll be fine.” Flare put a hoof gently on my back. “She's a tough filly. Always has been.”

“I know,” I said quietly. She was a tough little filly because I dragged her through the mud. Even though she wanted to come with me -- I still wished she didn't have to be so tough. “I know.” I repeated to myself to make sure I believed it before turning back to Tight Lips. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem. We're colleagues, compadres, sisters, in a way.” She perked up. “Speaking of friends, you're super lucky, did I ever tell you that?” No, and probably for a reason. “Because your friend, Pearls, or, whatever. She got here just in the nick of time to be allowed to stay, and she's been a great help. You sure know how to pick'em.” She winked at me, and it took me a second to get what she was implying.

“Er. She's just... I mean.” I fought the blush away, and just shook my head.

“Oh good! Because I was thinking of picking me off some of that.” She paused to laugh. “Just kidding, I'm straight. She will want to see you though, but you have things to do first, and fraternizing will have to wait. Things like seeing Mr. House about that ugly-ass leg of yours. That simply won't do. So off you go.” She shoved me lightly. “I'll even let you bring that cute buck-friend of yours. Even if he is a filthy Enclave vulture.” She turned to him. “No offence.”

Even Flare seemed a bit confused. “Uh, none taken.” She nodded at this and trotted off towards one of the security ponies guarding the door. “She's weird,” Flare said when she was out of earshot.

“Yup...” I sighed and looked towards the elevator. “Let's go see what Mr. House wants.” Probably for me to run off into another suicide mission to lose more body parts. I was starting to wonder if I was the only agent he had, because it was either that or I was the most expendable.

Without waiting for Flare to reply, I started off on slow walk towards the elevator, and did my best to ignore the stares of ponies milling around. It was clear as I navigated the mess of ponies that these were Mr. House's ponies, because nearly all of them had some sort of noticeable implant or another, and all were staring at my 'ugly' back leg in mild disgust. It infuriated me. Sure, they couldn't know that it was built by a filly in a hostile tunnel after saving me from bleeding out, but it didn't mean they had the right to judge my daughter's work. It was better than anything any of them could make at that age, or ever.

Shaming a mob wasn't on my to do list, however, so I kept walking until I reached the elevator. Flare hit the button to Mr. House's floor, and the doors finally closed behind me; I let out a sigh.

“She did a great job,” Flare said as he put his helmet back on. “Your leg, and Serenity, that is.” He apparently saw the looks, too. “Considering she's a filly, she should get a damn medal.” What she should get was a mother who didn't drag her into situations like that, or at least one with a brain. Instead she had me. “Hey...” Flare tilted his masked head and stared at my... collar.

“What.” I looked down at myself and wasn't sure what he was looking at. I was still wearing the modified black fireproof barding that was made for me. He seemed to be staring at the collar pockets built in for easy access (having no magic sucked sometimes), but there wasn't much in them: emergency ammo, emergency grenade, spark pulse emitter, Med-X, and note. Wait.

“Was that there before?” Flare pointed at the same note I saw. Apparently, he was very perceptive.

“Uh, no.” I carefully pulled it out of my pocket and laid it on the ground to read. “Room 829. What?” How the heck did that note even get in there...

“That's your room.” It was a good thing he said that, because I wouldn't have noticed. Really, I forgot what number it was. Maybe the note was something I put in my pocket to remind me what my room number was. It didn't look like Serenity's writing though (and if it were mine, it would be completely illegible), so I doubted that.

“Might as well check it out.” I hit the number eight button on the elevator pad. “It's on the way.”

“And a little extra radiation never hurt anypony.” You know what I never got enough of? Sarcasm.

“That reminds me,” I said as our ride rocked to a stop on the eighth floor. “Do you know what happened to my BEL?” I walked into the hall and heard my pipbuck ticking warily at me. “It was in my room before.”

“What, oh.” Flare followed after me, clanking in his heavy armour. “Starscream came in to check on you, saw it lying around, lectured me, and took it into private storage. Apparently having such a weapon lying around was just asking for trouble.” Well fuck him, too. “I didn't touch it at all, but damn was it tempting.”

“I wouldn't trust you with it,” I said as we walked into the hall. Immediately I could hear my pipbuck starting to click slowly. “Not that I trust myself with it either...” Really there should be a law barring me from getting close to mega-spells. Or explosives.

“Why not? I carry enough ordinance with me to double the size of a BEL launcher explosion, and you haven't said anything about that.” I was a bit suspicious of that number, but having never seen a BEL explosion I really couldn't doubt it. More likely than not he was just trying to trick me into letting him use it.

“I... maybe.” It sort of worked, his argument that is. On the one hoof, I didn't trust a drug addict with a weapon like that, but on the other, having that sort of power on my side could be crucial. I just wasn't sure the risk was worth the potential reward. Maybe if we had a super dangerous job fighting a dragon or something. “One thing at a time.”

I really needed a list of things I needed to get done. Step one: see what's waiting for me in my room. Step two: talk to Mr. House, get a bullshit job and some new body parts. Step three: find out who is behind the attack in the Train Station. Step four: kill them a lot. Step Five: take a long nap.

Yeah, that would do. I guess at some point I should add 'help Mr. House take over Disen' but I really wasn't sure I wanted to do that anymore. Still, the last help put my brain in order, so on to step one. I opened the door to my old room.

And there was nothing in there. Well, there was stuff in there. A few empty beer bottles I hadn't gotten around to cleaning up and a bed I'd left unmade. A few odds and ends, but nothing out of order. “Huh.” I guess it was just something someone wrote down for me so I could remember where my room was. With a sigh I walked in. I guess I could pick up some of the things I'd left, now that I was here.

“Ooooh, dramatic.” Flare had a way with words. He flew past me and looked out the window on the far side of the room. “It's a nice view, you know.” I didn't know, I tended to avoid that window and just shut the curtain. I didn't like thinking about how high up it was. “It's just... empty down there. You know, I've lived in this city all my life. I've seen the city grow and shape, I've been witness to gang wars and threats from the outside. One year there was a drought that nearly brought the city to its knees. But I've never seen it so empty before. So quiet.” He paused and turned away from the window. “I don't think I like it.”

Me either. Against my better judgement I walked over to the window and looked out from it... it was a good view wasn't it? Everything down below looked so small, and I could see so much. Was this what pegasi saw

every time they flew? I could almost see the allure. That was, until my stomach twisted and for a second I felt like I was falling again.

I had to step back quickly and take a deep breath to calm myself down. I really wanted to use one of my Med-Xs but I had to ration them. It wasn't that I was lacking for them, but with Dise dying, I wasn't sure where I could get more.

"If you are afraid of heights it would be advisable not to stand next to someplace high," a familiar voice said from behind me. When I turned I saw nothing, but soon that nothing faded and Platinum Haze stood there with a smile on her face. I had known something was in the room, from the burning sensation, though I wasn't positive it was her. "We are sorry. Did we surprise you? That was not our intention."

"Oh! Hey Haze!" Flare waved a wing at her, which was strangely familiar.

"Of course not..." I said softly and walked over to her. I had intended to nuzzle the beautiful alicorn, as I had before, but something was different. I couldn't reach... and for some reason my pipbuck was clicking more.

"Oh!" She said quickly and backed up. "I-it would be best you do not get too close."

"What? Are you taller?" With her further backed up I could she see was taller, by a fair bit too. So, I was fairly lost as to what the heck was going on.

"S-sorry. Tight Lips delivered the message to you then, right?" Message? Oh! The note in my pocket. And Tight Lips giving me a hug. Damn, she was good at that. Don't know why she made it so secret. "She said that she 'had to let young love bloom' but couldn't risk House finding out." That was interesting, but it didn't explain the size difference. "We are sorry about our size. My kind reacts this way to high concentrations of radiation, it is one of the reasons why Mother believed we would be the ideal race to rebuild equestria..."

That was different. "I'm just glad you're okay... but, why are you here?"

The alicorn looked over at Flare with a bit of confusion, "Did you not inform her of the situation? We thought we had requested such."

"Sorry, Haze," Flare said half-heartedly, "there was a lot to tell her, I guess I forgot."

The alicorn cast a sharp glare at Flare that, along with her increased size, made her almost terrifying. But it faded quickly into a resigned smile. "Okay." She turned back to me. "We... not long after the explosion, as crowds began storming into the tunnels, a group approached the orphanage. Celestia's Vision, they came back with what we could only describe as a mob. Somehow they knew where we were hidden, and attempted to take the children back by force."

"What." I felt myself panicking at the thought, but her calmness lead me to believe it wasn't as bad as it could be.

"It is... well, we cannot lie, we were worried. Our shield was fading, and rounding up foals in a panic was difficult for Diamond Sky and the others. We were convinced we would have to sacrifice ourselves to protect them." Part of me wanted to ask why she didn't just kill them back, but I already knew the answer. "Your friend, Flare, he was able to save us. He used a flashbang to blind the crowd, then engineered a tunnel collapse. It did not stop the mob, but slowed them down enough for Diamond Sky to teleport the foals to safety."

"Spitshine too right?" I had to make sure. "And, er, to where?"

"Yes." The alicorn nodded. "Of course. The foal, was that her name? We did not have a chance to question her, given the circumstances." She looked to Flare for confirmation on that and didn't continue until he nodded. "As for where they were taken, we are not allowed to disclose that information, but it is a safe place. Far away. We had set it up, first, in the event of an emergency, though we can say we did not expect to need to use it so soon. We are to wait here until the time is right to return." She seemed upset by that. "We hope that the children are okay, we will miss them,"

"What will you do until then?" Who knew how long it would take the radiation to fade.

“We... we do not know. We are unsure of what to do with free time. We imagine we can help you, but we can't think that our particular help would be of much use.” Right, the pacifist thing.

“I'd always appreciate your help.” I gave her my best smile. Which was just big enough that I looked sincere, but not enough to stretch my facial scars that much. “I guess you can stay in my room for now... I won't be getting much use out of it.”

She gave a heavy sigh and nodded. “Thank you.” She seemed to stare at the floor with a sad look on her face.

“I'm sure you'll see the foals soon enough.” I did my best to sound reassuring, but really I didn't know for sure.

She looked up from the floor to stare at me with her strange yellow eyes. She looked like she was about to say something, but stopped herself and scrunched up her muzzle in confusion. “Where is your foal? We would very much like to see her...” She frowned for a second and looked over at my back where Serenity often sat... then gasped. “Your leg!”

“Oh.” I felt like an idiot for not telling her. “It's.. a long story.”

By the time I told her what happened I realized that either the story really wasn't that long, or that I sucked at details. Possibly both. Either way, I ended with telling her that Serenity was being looked at by doctors, probably for radiation sickness that they could easily cure. At least, I hoped.

“I'm sorry.” She gave a heavy sigh. “We wish we could have assisted you at that time. But, we are curious. You stated that your leg was cut off, but where did you acquire that replacement?”

Somehow in my short story-telling I completely forgot the most important part. “Serenity made it. Or rather, modified it from the old one she built... after saving my life. I think she killed a few bugs too...” I gave a long pause to think about that. “She's pretty amazing, isn't she?” How could a filly like that not have her cutie-mark yet?

“Yes... she is.” Platinum Haze smiled at me and moved forward and kissed me on the cheek, before quickly retreating to her spot across the room again “We are sorry for taking time away from your day; we are certain you have things to do. We will remain here for now, but we may go down to check on Serenity for you. We worry about her.”

My cheeks started to burn up at the kiss (or maybe the radiation she was emitting), but I had more important things to worry about. I closed my eyes and nodded. “Yeah. Need to see Mr. House... thanks, for caring. I... I'm going to find out who did this. The radiation. I'll find out why, and stop them.” Someone had to, and I was the only one with any clue at all. “And then the orphanage can move back. That'll be great, right?”

I waited until she nodded before I turned and left the room. No part of me really wanted to leave Platinum Haze, but I had a job to do and blah blah blah. I was Hired Gun, so off I went to my employer. Some things never change.

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“It's not right...” Were the words we heard Mr. House speak to himself as we closed in on his room. As a ghou, radiation actually healed him, so he never moved from his old room, or even bothered to close his door it seemed. “It's not the same...” Flare and I entered his room to find him staring at one of the screens on his giant computer terminal.

“Do you know,” he said to us when we entered the room, “that I stood in this exact same place when it happened.” In this context the 'it' didn't need to be explained. “My aids were telling me I should leave, yelling at me about a vertibuck and a stable, and how we should go. Reports were flooding in they said. Manehatten, Flankyard, Cloudsdale, Canterlot, Hoofington, even Trotonto... all gone. Yet Dise stood, for the longest time it stood still, halfway between panic and eerie calm. I thought perhaps we dodged the bullet, that we would survive.” He looked out his window, which I now realized was shattered. “Then everything was fire. Thousands died in the flash, and I was thrown back. When I awoke, my skin was peeling, and the world was dead. I could feel the radiation, feel it keeping me alive. At the time it was strange, but by now it's... normal.” He turned back to look at me with glowing green eyes, “Something is wrong. The radiation, there's

not enough... in two hundred and fifty years I have made a lot of memories, but that one. Those early moments. I'll never forget."

"So maybe the combination of all the megaspells going off made it feel different than the one that went off this time." Flare said.

"Maybe. But... no. It's still too weak. If whatever went off was a megaspell, it was a weak one... bigger than a balefire egg, but it wasn't the same as the ones I've seen." He stopped and looked directly at me, his eyes reminding me of how The Laughing Stallion looked right before he exploded. "You were there; you need to tell me. Is it true? The rumours. That the Minotaurs rigged a mega-spell to that freak who fought the Batmare?" He seemed tired and frustrated. Though I admit I wasn't the best at reading faces, especially ghoulish faces.

"Maybe," was my reply. "Sort of. Do you remember what I told you of the Facility, and Simple Heart?" He nodded slowly. "It was like that. He *was* the megaspell. It was like Simple Heart. Only it worked." I then added quickly. "I don't think it was the minotaurs though... they seemed confused, and denied it."

"And yet," he added sharply, "I'm sure you have no theories of your own." He turned back to his computer. "But I believe you. This was not minotaur work, if only for that megaspell technology would be beyond them. Even during the Great War, they borrowed weapons from zebras. And..." He tapped something at his computer. "Those files you sent me indicated that the pony-megaspell research data was sent to Trotonto, well beyond Minotaur reach even now."

"Where?" I moved slightly closer so I could see he had a map on his terminal.

"Oh..." His voice broke from cocky to confused for a split second. "Eye Glow. That's the name now, I always forget..." He quickly composed himself. "It was the capital of Caledonia before the war, and now it's the largest city in the NCA." If I remembered correctly it was also the city Serenity came from before she was with the Watchers in Dise. "I'm not sure where in Eye Glow, but it hardly matters. Never has a single Minotaur set foot into that city, everypony agrees, and while it doesn't completely rule them out, it's enough to shine doubt. Thank you for giving me this information, Hired... but now we need to get to another matter." He closed what he was looking at in the terminal. "Where *were* you? My only operative close to the scene vanished for a day and a half; do you have any idea the disadvantage it put me in?"

"Uh..." I really should have thought of a decent lie before hoof, so I just blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "I was taken prisoner by the minotaurs... They thought I had something to do with the explosion, and didn't believe me when I denied it. I managed to escape but." I turned around slowly and showed off my new amputation. "Not unscathed."

Mr. House visibly grimaced at the leg, but then... stopped. He leaned in and inspected the leg curiously. "Isn't this the same one your filly built?" I was a bit amazed at his memory, considering. "Yes... yes I can see it. She modified it to work as a hind leg, that's... impressive."

"Yeah... she built it after stopping my blood loss... and while fighting rad-scorpions. And there was the radiation..." I said slowly, as if not really believing it myself.

"I see..." He turned away, "We'll need to get you a better one... and once this radiation thing is over I'd like to set your filly up in an apprenticeship position." Wait. What. "If she's this skilled so young, I want her trained right, and I want her working for me."

"I... I'm sure she'd be ecstatic..." To put it lightly. I couldn't wait to tell her. "But... just all of a sudden."

"I wasn't aware just how talented she was. Does she have her cutie-mark yet?" I shook my head which prompted him to continue. "Good. Maybe she'll get a cybernetic cutie-mark if we nurture her gift. I've never seen a pony with that as a special talent... it'd be amazing." If he said so. I didn't really get the importance of cutie-marks anyway. I mean my special talent was being as dumb as a rock, or something.

"Okay..." I shuffled awkwardly.

"We'll still need to get you a new leg, and there are a few things I need to get done concerning the documents you brought me the other day, but those can wait until you're fitted with a new leg. I won't bother asking you

what model you want; I'm sure you won't understand." He looked at my foreleg for a second and hummed. "We really should add a sword to that. You fight hoof-to-hoof right?" I nodded. "Right, I'll have my technicians add a blade." Apparently, I didn't get a choice.

"Okay..." I said and Flare just snickered at me.

"I'll send a message, unless you have something better to do." His tone suggested I didn't have anything better to do. He turned back to give Flare a strange look. "I suggest going down there soon. I need you fixed up as soon as possible. There are precarious times; Dise is changing, whether we like it or not, and the winner will be he who acts first." he let out a sigh and looked out the window, only this time he looked up at the raptor looming over the entire city. "What are you waiting for," he snapped when he noticed me pause. "Go."

Flare and I shared a look when we turned to leave his room, but neither of us said anything. There was nothing left to be said. I had my orders (and I'm sure Flare had his), so all we could do was our jobs...

As we walked together towards the elevator, I brought up the courage to ask Flare a question. "If there was ever a time... if the Enclave told you to kill me, would you?"

Flare snorted through his iron mask, and said, "Who's to say they haven't already?"

Was that supposed to be a joke? I really didn't know, and I suppose I didn't want to know because I never asked. Though I'm not sure why the Enclave would even want me dead. I was also not sure why someone would think detonating a megaspell around Dise would be a good idea either, so clearly we couldn't go by my understanding of how the world works. I just had to be confident that Flare would never actually try to kill me, and if -- Celestia forbid -- he did try, that I could stop him and kick some sense into him. For all I liked to complain about the pegasus, I'd rather see him alive than dead.

It was then, when we were walking into the elevator and I was fully confident that Flare wouldn't try to kill me, that a little voice in the back of my head asked.

*What if you were ordered to kill him?*

Then I would kill him...

I turned my head to look over at the armour clad pegasus. He was flapping his wings impatiently and tapping his hooves against the floor with his head down. He looked up suddenly and towards the digital sign above the door that said what floor we were on. I could hear a subtle sigh emitting from his mask and he looked back at the floor.

Actually. I don't think I would kill Flare. Instead I would simply quit the job, and refuse to accept it. My personal 'code' or whatever you wanted to call it forbade me from breaking a job I agreed to, so all I would have to do is not agree. The way I saw it was that any boss that wanted me to kill Flare wasn't someone worth working for.

"There's smoke coming from your ears," Flare said, breaking the silence quite suddenly. I was about to ask what he meant, but he added, "You had that look on your face like you're thinking hard. Or trying to take a shit." Just because I resolved never to kill the pegasus didn't mean he didn't deserve a smack from time to time.

So I reached out and kicked one of his forelegs out from under him. He apparently wasn't expecting it because he started to fall. Unfortunately, he managed to catch himself with a wing and push himself back to a standing position, but I think I got my point across.

Eventually we reached the medical floor, and just like Mr. House had said, the doctors there were waiting for us. Or, rather, they were waiting for me, because they chased Flare away as soon as we entered. Apparently they thought he was a distraction or something with that heavy armour clanking around.

It was the same process as the last time I got cybernetic work done. I was taken into a small white room, stripped down, and placed on a soft bed. They put a mask over my face and made me count down from five.

---

Marigold asked me hurriedly, "What are you planning?" as I stormed out of her house with blood still on my hooves. Despite saving her from the raiders that were invading Marefort she was surprisingly unhelpful. She kept babbling about The Crimson Hoof and Smooth Tongue and such things, but she didn't understand. None of that mattered. Wildfire and Foundation were still alive, so I would have to save them. What else would I do?

"I'm a guard, right?" I stopped near a ramp to a lower level. To an outside Marefort would seem like a mess, but if you lived there long enough you got a feel for its oddities.

"Y-yes." Marigold would know. She was always my boss. Even if she was a bit of a coward.

"Then I have to protect them, all of them." Wildfire and Foundation in particular. "It's my job. Right? So that's what I'm going to do." I turned back to look at her. She was a pitiful sight, with her eyes bloodshot red, and her golden mane a frizzled mess. "You're going to help. Until we can rescue others. First, I need to know more." She seemed confused as she tried to dry her eyes. "How many? Where did they take ponies? Any escaped?" I doubted she knew anything... and I wasn't sure what I'd do with the information once I got it. But it seemed the important sort of thing to have.

"I-I-I'm not sure. I saw... a lot. Two dozen. Maybe more." Okay... that was a lot. "We can't fight that many."

"I can." Though I wasn't so sure of my words. I had never really been in an actual fight to the death before that night. So far I was doing good, though, and I was strong. I would need help for sure, but I was confident. "Did you see where they took the others?"

"I... I didn't really... I just saw them from my window, and heard them outside my door. Some ponies might not have been grabbed yet." She was right, I realized then. I could still hear a few cries from below. Ponies being corralled no doubt. There might be time to save others though.

"S-silver!" Marigold was pointing, and my eyes snapped to the sight. In the gloom I could see a unicorn with a rifle leading another by a length of chain.

"The fuck are you two doing?" The stallion snorted walking closer. The glow from his horn was enough to illuminate his ugly face. He had some sort of hideous scar that made it look like something had tried to tear his face off and eat it, but he had it hastily sewn back on. "If you want your fucking knee caps I suggest you drop the weapon, freak." I think he was addressing me.

"No." If he seriously thought that was an option he must have been as stupid as he was ugly.

"Bitch, that wasn't an option. If you come quietly you won't be hurt... much. But if you resist things will go bad." He gave a sickly smile, as if that would convince me. Not that it was his smile that caught my attention, rather my eyes were drawn to the faint glowing to my side. Didn't look at what I saw, save for a parting glance, because I knew he'd see me.

He had floated his rifle off the side of the walkway we were on, to bring it around on me, unseen. Except I did see, and that gave me that advantage.

"Okay," I said through the rifle in my mouth. "Okay..." I tried my best to make my voice deflate. It had to convince him, or I was as good as dead. I leaned down in an apparent attempt to drop the rifle on the ground.

At the last second I bucked. My hind leg slammed into the floating rifle just as the stallion pulled the trigger. The bullet flew wide and rang against the metal walkway, and thankfully not into me. As he desperately positioned his wobbling gun for another shot, I pulled the trigger of my gun. Unlike him, I hit my target and his knee shattered in bits of bone and gore. Instantly his magic faded from his horn and he collapsed.

Marigold was sobbing in shock as I walked over to the whimpering stallion and finished him off. "Marigold, please." I had to hope the rest of raiders would think the shot was from them executing an unruly citizen. The sobbing might help that effect, but it was still hard to move around unseen like that.

Marigold reluctantly stopped at my command, so I was free to speak to the pony the stallion had chained. "Are you alright?" I recognized the mare right away as Star Belle. She was always a fiery little thing, so seeing her tied up was... it was wrong. She gave me a small confident nod and spat in the direction of the

corpse. “Good. Uh, Marigold, could you search the body for any keys.” If he did have some they might just work on any other captive we found.

Marigold was most unhelpful, and refused to touch a dead body, so I had to go searching. Thankfully I found the key ring on a string around his neck rather quickly, and I unlocked the collar around Star Belle's neck, and fetlocks.

“Thanks, Silver. I should've known they'd never take you. Not without a whole army backing them up.” She gave me a weak smile. “So, what's the plan?” She walked over and grabbed the dead pony's rifle. “We can't take them all on.”

“We can try. First, we need to free the others.” I slid the string with the keys around my neck. “They caught us by surprise. But if we arm, we can drive them out.”

“That's a plan...” She looked over to Marigold. “Is she okay?”

“I-I-I'm fine.” Marigold said. “If we g-get out of here. Alive. We should run to Stable 42. S-smooth Tongue, he can...” Star Belle looked confused at this statement. “It's the only way.”

“Well, I'm not willing to risk lives by running there and back,” Star Belle replied. “We need to fight.”

“B-but. If we had Smooth Tongue a-and the Crimson Hoof. If they p-protected us again.”

“Who's up there?” A voice called from a lower floor. From the distance I could see a silhouette staring right at us. “Stay there! Ponies escaped up there!” The mare yelled at the top of her lungs, and all of Marefort became aware. I could hear the pattering of hooves starting to run.

“Run now. Talk later.” I started off in a gallop. I could hear my two comrades behind me, but behind them I could start to hear the rest of the raider gang converging on us. We had to move fast, but luckily I knew Marefort better than anypony. Which also meant I knew how to escape. “This way!” I said just loud enough for the two behind me to hear.

Instead of turning for one of the ramps down to a lower floor, I just kept running until I found the shack I was looking for. It was flush against the wall of the warehouse Marefort was built in, and at the time unoccupied. When Star Belle and Marigold entered, I slammed the door behind them. We had to be quick, and they had to not chicken out, or we'd all end up dead.

“There's nothing here! We're trapped!” Marigold cried out. It took a lot of reserve not to smack her.

“Here.” I moved quickly across the room to where the bed was. I pushed it out of the way to reveal a hole large enough for a pony to crawl through. On the other side was a small lip on the outside of the structure barely large enough for somepony to stand on, but it was an escape. “Quickly!”

Marigold balked for a second when she realized what she would have to stand on, but her resolve steeled when she looked back at the door and realized her other option. After she was through Star Belle quickly followed. When it was my turn, I crawled out backwards, dragging the bed with me to partially cover up the hole. It wasn't perfect; the raiders might find the hole, but not quickly.

The wind whipped violently at us and nearly shook me off the small ledge. When I looked down at the dark abyss below me, though, I wasn't scared, just more secure in my decision. This plan was going to work. It had to.

“There.” Not far from the back wall of Marefort was the cliff face that rose above the town, and provided a great lookout spot. More importantly was that said cliff had many grooves and ledges large enough to fit ponies. I had snuck out of Marefort many times in the past when I was a child, or when I wanted to meet Wildfire at the guard house without being noticed. “Jump,” I commanded.

“B-but...” As Marigold tried to protest Star Belle jumped. It was easy enough for the small mare and she made it onto the cliff without issue. Marigold gave a short sniff and wiped her eyes before jumping also. She almost didn't make it when part of the rocks she landed on crumpled beneath her, but Star caught her and helped her back up. The golden-maned mare was shaken, but unhurt.

“Okay,” I said when I landed beside them. “Marigold. That way.” I pointed the opposite direction from where we were facing, where the cliff path snaked upwards. “Leads towards the top. You can go to Stable 42 from there. Me and Star will go rescue the others. Okay?”

She gave a tentative nod. “Yes... good plan... I... Silver. Thank you.” She suddenly wrapped her legs around me in a tight hug. Now, I was awkward at the best of times, so right then I must have looked ridiculous patting her on the back. Eventually, she let go and started up the cliff on her journey leaving me and Star Belle.

“Yeah, what she said. But don't feel too bad, I'm just not the huggy sort.” Star smirked at me.

“Yeah, me either.” I started to walk down the sloped path towards the ground. It was so dark out I could barely see my hooves, but I knew the way well enough that I didn't need to. It was a strange path, and for some reason there were a few spots on it where rusted metal poles jutted out from the ground, blocking me from the edge. Whatever they were for, when I saw them it let me know how close to the ground we were, as otherwise the darkness was so impenetrable I couldn't tell.

When we reached the bottom I took a deep breath of cold night air. Wildfire and Foundation were still out there, and I had to find them. Or die trying.

---

I couldn't have been more glad that I finish that dream. I knew where it led, and it was not a place I wanted to go ever again.

My eyes opened, and I was immediately blinded by bright hospital lights. After a few seconds of whining groggily, I sat up. My new hind leg stung like a bitch, and when I looked to the table beside me I could see an empty Med-X syringe. Only one though, which wasn't nearly enough. Still, I didn't want them to think I was trying to OD, so I would have to wait before I went searching through my bags for another. At least until they inspected me and let me leave.

In the meantime, I inspected my new hind leg. It was the same colour as my foreleg, but the style was very different. Instead of skeletal, it was full, and looked rather like a metal cylinder in shape. All along it were various ports for devices I was unfamiliar with, probably more spying equipment.

“Oh, you're awake.” My eyes darted to the door where one of my doctors stood. “How do you like it? It's a relatively new design: completely quiet, and it comes with a shotgun that goes off on impact.” That wasn't going to backfire at all... “And your foreleg has been modified with a retractable blade. There was some concern about, er, accidents.” Mr. House didn't trust me with built in weaponry, and really I didn't blame him. “So I implemented a safety feature. The sword is controlled via your mind, and simply thinking will allow you to use it, but only if a physical safety switch is hit.” He walked over and pointed to the small button on the side of my hoof-cuff. “Try it out.”

Cue me accidentally stabbing out my remaining eyeball. Actually, when I hit the switch, nothing happened, and it wasn't until I pointed my hoof away and actually thought about it that the thin blade shot out. It was about a third of a meter long, and really thin.

“It's a special alloy. It should be hard to break and easy to maintain.” Carefully I mentally retracted the blade and turned the safety back on. I made a mental note not to forget to turn the safety on. “I had wanted to perform an update to your eye, but there were concerns about the odd intelligence chip you have installed, and I didn't wish to endanger you.” Thanks... “I am sorry for going through this all so fast, but you had a visitor who said it was important.”

“About time, Doc.” Flare walked into the hospital without his armour, and looking like he desperately needed a shower after being cooped up inside it for so long. “You look good, Hired... okay, you look better than you did. You've never looked good.” At least Flare was honest. “Serenity's up, and I think she had something to tell you.”

“Serenity!” I leaped from the bed without a second thought, and the impact on the ground to my newly installed limbs caused jolts of pain to run through me. “Where?” I ignored the pain. It didn't matter. Nothing

else mattered.

“I’ll show you,” Flare said, stifling a chuckle. “You’re so predictable. This way, I’ll show you to her room.”

There were many questions I’d normally be asking. Like... how long I was out? Where was all my stuff? Why wasn’t Flare in armour anymore? But who cared about that shit? My daughter needed me, so I had to go to her.

Flare showed me through a series of odd-smelling halls before he reached the room where Serenity was. I found myself nervous for some reason, and hesitated going in. She had saved my life back in the tunnels without a doubt, and I had almost gotten her killed by bringing her with me. Of course the other options hadn’t been much better, but there was that pang of guilt I always got. I should’ve been a better mother to her, but I didn’t know how.

I steeled my resolve and moved to go through the door. But again I faltered. What if she wanted to leave, stay with Platinum Haze at the orphanage? That’d be a good thing, right? ...except she couldn’t know that was no longer a possibility. If that was what this was about, how could I disappoint her?

*Just talk to her...* a familiar voice said in my head, and instantly I felt silly. I couldn’t have a pretend discussion about something when I had a real one to attend to. Worrying about things she hadn’t said yet wasn’t going to get me anywhere but one step closer to death by anxiety. So I just opened the door.

“MOMMA!” Came a shrill cry as soon as my head stuck through the door. Before I could respond the little filly had wrapped her hooves around my neck. It seemed like forever since I had seen her without that black fireproof outfit on, she was wearing it the entire time she was passed out. “MOMMA, LOOK!”

I did. Well, I had been anyway. I was admiring how clean she managed to keep her pink coat despite everything, but when she said ‘Look’, I knew what she meant. There on her coat was what she had been waiting for.

“Isn’t it awesome?! It’s just so perfect! Look! See?!” For being sick, she sure was hyper.

“It is awesome, sweetie; it fits you so well,” I said in a soft tone as I admired her cutie-mark. It was a much better one than mine; hers actually made sense.

It occurred to me that she must have gotten it back in the tunnels. When she saved my life and made me a leg on the spot. It made sense, but with everything that was happening I hadn’t thought to take her outfit off to check.

On her flank was a picture of a heart. The left half of it was a bright pink, enough to stand out against her pale coat, while the other half was comprised of three yellow gears and a snaking yellow wire on a gray frame.

Level Up!

Companion Perk: Emergency Mechanics: Serenity now has a +30 chance to complete mechanics checks, and an extra +15 when the check has to do with cybernetics.

((A/N: There’s a lot of excuses I could make for the slowness of this chapter. Like I was looking for a job, and I’m at school now, and my editors have lives that sometimes delay things. All are true, but most of it was because this chapter was hard to write. Not because it was a long chapter, or an emotionally hard one, but because its that part of the story where it’s hard to keep writing. The middle part of stories is always the hardest, and its hard to write sometimes. I haven’t given up, nor will I, I just need to force myself to write even when it’s hard. It’s my fault for the delay, and I’m sorry. I will try my best to do better for you, my lovelies.

As well I need to thank Kkat for creating this world that I get to play in, and my editors three for helping me out and making the story suck less; theBSDude, Menti, and Julep. Cheers! ~No One~))

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## Chapter 27: Deicide

*"I am a pony, more sinned against than sinning."*

"You're joking right?" It was odd for me to say those words, because Mr. House never joked. And he certainly wouldn't bring me, Flare, and Serenity up to his irradiated office, just to tell a horrible joke. So he must have called us up to tell a horrible truth. When he had said a few days earlier he had a job he wanted me to do when I was healed, I was hoping it would involve sticking a spike through Dragonslayer's heart.

The plan, for lack of an appropriate term, was for me to somehow infiltrate The Clips and Clops Casino (home to Granny Dynamite, The Galicians, and about fifteen thousand ponitrons), sneak into their basement, and look for a computer that remotely controlled the ponitrons. Apparently the documents from Wallkirk's office I'd delivered to Mr. House indicated there was an extra electrical room in the basement, this one connected directly to the local power grid, and considering the hotel had been Wallkirk's base of operations before the war, it seemed to indicate some kind of network control. It seemed like a stretch to me, but Mr. House was convinced that the ponitrons had to be remotely controlled from somewhere, and up until that point nobody had any clue where.

"For once I agree with pea brain," Flare said, standing closer to the door than the rest of us for fear House would notice we'd let an Enclave officer into a private meeting.

The ghoul snapped his eyes towards the blue pegasus, his glowing eyes narrowing, "You are here, *pegasus*, not because I like or trust you, but so I can tell you this directly: if any of this information is leaked to the Enclave, you won't survive the night. Your opinions are of no concern." Mr. House turned back to address me. "There is more, of course, and you needn't use the front door to access the room. Wallkirk created the tunnels, and he was nothing if not paranoid, so he created a back-door connected to his tunnel system."

That made a certain amount of sense, as it seemed every one of the major hotels had some sort of emergency exit. It seemed odd to me how prepared the city was for the apocalypse. Not that it'd helped in the end. "What if the door is locked. Or blocked. Or can only be open from inside?" I thought of the secret tunnel entrance Mayhem had showed me a while ago.

"That," he looked back over at Flare, "is why I'm letting you take *him*."

"No door can withstand my might," Flare said in a self-amused tone.

I had to admit the existence of a back-door did make it more likely there was something important in that room, but that didn't mean he was right about what that thing was. It was probably just a secret room like the one under The Moon... and Mr. House, like everypony else, needed something to cling to.

"If there is a computer there, how will that help?" It wasn't as if I knew how to hack, the best I could do was kick it, or hope Serenity was able to do something with it. Even though Serenity managed to wriggle her way into coming with me to the briefing, if only so she could see Platinum Haze afterward, but she was far too sick to come along. Besides, with the tunnels awash as they were, I would have insisted she stay in Dise anyway.

Mr. House walked back to his computer and started to type something, "If I'm right..." That was a pretty big if. "Then the computer would have to transmit and receive information wirelessly. Assuming it's a model of computer that is similar to the popular models before the war..." There we go again with the assuming. "I should be able to upload a program onto your pipbuck that you can transfer onto the computer so I can control it remotely."

"And when it's no-" Flare started to snark, but was swiftly cut off.

"*If* it's not." Mr. House dug into a drawer and removed a... crown. Actually, I think it was technically a tiara, with a black opal inlaid into it. "This is a recollector. It's incredibly valuable—virtually priceless. It will allow you record any memory so long as the device is on and active. I want you to wear this once you enter

the room, and look very closely at everything inside. If the program doesn't work, I want to know as much about it as possible.” At least it was pretty... though after Platinum Haze's memory spell fuck up, I was nervous about using that thing.

“Why don't you just send Wishing Star.” If I remembered correctly, the impossibly advanced cyborg had like, camera eyes. And he could disguise himself, so he would've far better suited for this mission than I would.

“He is away on a mission,” Mr. House said in an almost bitter tone. “Most of the Hizai are. Only you, Starscream, and Tightlip's security detail are available, and the others I need.” He beckoned me with a hoof to his computer terminal, so I did what was asked. Serenity was lying down on my back, but I think she'd fallen asleep a while ago.

“Hoof.”

I lifted up my metal leg.

“Other hoof.” Oh, right, my pipbuck.

He plugged a wire into my pipbuck and connected it to his massive computer, but kept talking. “Do you know they blame me.” I didn't even get to ask 'who' before he answered, “The people. Somehow they found out I'm a ghoul, and they think I wanted this...” The radiation, because ghouls healed from it. “They're in the tunnels blaming me for what happened, accusing me of kicking out civilians to die while I horde rad-away for my Hizai and bask in the radiation. They think I wanted this!” He looked up at the window towards the raptor still looming high over the city. “I can't save everyone; I kept as many inside as possible, but I couldn't bring the entire city into my walls. So they blame me, and they're going to come for me. The longer the wait, the more the discontent in the tunnels grow, and eventually they will come for me. Tight Lip will do what she can, but I do not have as many guards as I would like, and if the city rises up to tear me down it won't be enough.” He closed his eyes as my pipbuck beeped that it was finished downloading the program.

“Who... who do you think did this then? Blow the megaspell, that is...” I knew it was Dragonslayer, but what I didn't know was who he was working for. I assumed it was the Steel Rangers, or at least the Steel Rangers controlled by Blackwater, that horrible bitch, but I wasn't sure and maybe Mr. House knew something.

He looked over at me, “Do I really need to answer.” He pointed a hoof towards the raptor hanging over the city like a black cloud. “Who had the most to gain from this chaos? And then that *thing* shows up on the same day. I don't believe in coincidence.”

Flare coughed politely into his armoured hoof, “The Enclave doesn't have the resources to manufacture regular megaspells, never mind fuse them with ponies.”

“Nopony asked your opinion, chicken.” Mr. House said with a sneer directed at Flare.

“Since you asked my opinion, I think it was the Minotaurs.” I almost laughed. The Minotaur King was at the Train Station when the bomb went off. “Who's to say the guy they sent as their 'King' was anybody at all? Maybe he was just a good liar who'd die for the cause, and when the cause was wiping out the entirety of the NCA top brass and security personnel from every major gang, then it was worth the price.” If I hadn't travelled with the Minotaur King to the base in the tunnels I might have agreed with Flare.

“And still you continue.” Mr House hoofed over the crown-like device to me, “Be careful with this. If it gets broken, I'm taking it out of your pay.” I was going to have to thank Flare later for putting my boss in a bad mood. “I don't know why you put up with that Enclave bastard.”

“He's not so bad,” I replied as I carefully put the expensive device into my saddle bag, “if you can get past the talking. And he saved my life a few times.” My memory went back into to the time he took the gatling laser to the back to save me, and it burned so bad it melted part of his armour to slag. A crowning moment to my stupidity.

Mr. House lowered his voice to barely a whisper. “Whatever your reasons, watch him. I don't trust him, and neither should you.”

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But I did trust Flare. Which was weird to think about, because he hadn't always always honored that trust, but when it came right down to it, I knew he'd risk his life for me or Serenity, and that's what really mattered. So long as that didn't change, I would always trust Flare, idiot that he was.

"Mmmmmh..." I heard mumbling on my back right as we left House's office. "Is it over?" Serenity asked before smacking her lips and giving a tiny yawn.

"Yes, sweetie," I said as I continued to walk towards the elevator.

"And you missed it!" Flare said with false enthusiasm that was slightly undermined by the almost robotic like voice his mask made him sound like. "There were balloons! And Cake! Then we got the awesomest mission ever. Shame you fell asleep."

"Butt." Serenity said, and I couldn't have been more proud of her. "What really happened? Where we goin' next?"

"You're going nowhere." We entered the small elevator, and I quickly punched in the button to take us to Platinum Haze's floor. "Except to hang out with either Platinum Haze or Pearly." I hadn't really asked, but I was sure one of them would be willing to watch Serenity for a bit. Though I was more hoping Pearly would agree because of the radiation issues.

"But mooooo--"

"No 'but mom's. You're still sick, and you need to get better before I will even think about taking you on another dangerous adventure." Hopefully I would never have to take her with me ever again, but even with my limited pattern recognition, that I knew that wasn't likely.

"It's going to be boring anyway," Flare said in an attempt to back me up, "just computer stuff." It was a poor attempt.

"But I *love* computer stuff!" Serenity tugged on the back of my mane, "Mommy, you need to let me come now! How are you going to be able to do computery stuff, and what if I need to save your life again?"

"I'll be fine, honey." Well, as fine as I ever was. "Flare will be there too, and he's saved my life plenty of times too, and the computer stuff is simple." Probably.

"But what if I need to save his life too!" Serenity said as we walked out of the elevator towards the room.

"Then I guess we'll all die a horrible death as we cry out our stupidity for not bringing you along. It'll be sad and tragic, and you'll be secure in how right and awesome you are." Flare said, his voice echoing from the mask. "You're still not coming with us."

"Awww, but--" She let out a series of coughs that almost knocked her off. "I'm not too--" Cough. "Sick."

"Sweetie." I stopped in the middle of the hall and listened carefully to the ticking of my pipbuck. The radiation levels outside of safe zones hadn't gone down at all since last time. "Here, drink this." I took out a rad-away, and before I could turn to hoof it to her I felt Serenity magic it away and start chugging. "You're probably too sick to be up here at all. I'm worried about you, which is why you can't go. You can't save anyone if you're puking your guts out."

Serenity finished the rad-away, make an 'ick' sound, and put the empty potion into my pack before replying, "Yeah... alright... just this once."

"Just this once." I promised, opening the door to my old room.

The inside was just as I left it, including the blue alicorn lying across the couch floating a book in front of her. Platinum Haze's ears twitched and she turned to smile at us. "Ah, we were not expecting you back so soon." She carefully bookmarked her page and set the book down on the coffee table. "We regret to inform you we are still slightly bleeding radiation, and it would dangerous for us to spend any excessive time in close contact with eac--"

"HAZE!" Serenity, not one for listening to warnings, charges forward and wrapped her forelegs around the alicorn's neck, "Hi!"

“Uh, hi.” Platinum Haze stretched out a wing and wrapped it around the filly hugging her close. “While we are glad to be seeing you again, we must repeat our previous statement about it being dangerous to have prolonged contact with us, due to our body’s affinity with magical radiation.”

“It’s fine!” Serenity said with the type of confidence only a child could have. “I just had some of that icky rad-away, and I got *much* sicker the other day after saving Momma’s life. But I had to do it; you know how she is, always getting’ shot’n stuff. Most ponies would be dead by now, but they’re not as tough as Momma.”

There were few enough ponies who were quite as tough as me, so I guess that was good. “Yeah, I’m a tough one,” I said stepping into the room as well, “and Serenity, that’s enough hugging for now. You don’t want to be sick for any longer than you have to.”

Serenity gave Haze’s neck another squeeze but did reluctantly let go and walk back over to the other side of the room, “Stupid radiation...,” she muttered under her breath.

“We are sorry, young Serenity,” Platinum Haze said as she got up from the couch to stand at her full impressive height across the room from us. “But we heard you were very brave.”

Serenity’s face lit back up at the talk about how brave she was and she nodded enthusiastically, “Yup! I saved Momma’s life, and scared away the big bug when it tried to kill her. Silly things were weak to loud noises; I think it hurt him.” Huh, I hadn’t actually thought about the spell that Serenity used. It must have been some sort of modification of her sound dispelling spell. “OH!” Serenity spun around quickly showing off her cutie-mark, “Look, look!”

Platinum Haze smiled softly, “It is quite lovely to be sure. What do you imagine it means Serenity?”

“It means I’m good with cybernetics and have a big heart, I think. Yeah, totally. Because I’m awesome, I’m going to make cybernetics when I’m older, Mr. House said he’s going to train me, and stuff.” Serenity said with a huge smile. “Isn’t it awesome?”

“Yes, we believe it is indeed something worthy of considerable praise. We have met many ponies, but we cannot recall meeting anypony with that particular special talent. Truly you are unique and special.” Serenity seemed to accept this compliment judging by her huge smile.

“Hey...” Serenity squinted her eyes at the alicorn, “How come you don’t have a cutie-mark anyway? You’re like, way old.”

“We are somewhere roughly between sixty and eighty years old.” Wait, what... there was no way she looked that old! “Though we cannot be completely certain, as, while it is true Mother only began increasing the demand for alicorns within the last ten to twenty years, she had been perfecting the creation of our sisters for much longer; and after studying what memories we have that we believe to be our own rather than a bi-product of Unity, comparing them with more recent post-unity memories in regards to structures we have seen, and contrasting the relative age, that is the most accurate judgement we can make of our age. There is no way to properly confirm our suspicions, but given our altered state, age is no longer of much importance to us.” She seemed a bit perplexed at her own answer for a few seconds before realizing we were still staring at her. “We are sorry, what was the question?”

Serenity gave a slight giggle before answering, “I asked why you don’t have a cutie-mark.”

“Oh! Yes, we are unsure.” I prepared myself for another long winded rant. “We are quite positive we possessed a cutie-mark before our induction to unity, but our lack of one following the dissolution is a bit concerning. It has come to our attention to none of our sisters seem to retain their cutie-marks, except in special circumstances, as some sort of result of Unity. Our belief is that the changes to our body and soul was enough to divorce us from our previous talent, and we must either remember and enact our old special talent, or discover a new one. This is of course, only a theory, since Mother is no longer with us, the exact nature of the changes are mostly a mystery.”

“So...” Serenity said slowly, content to ignore the explanation, “that makes me more mature than you. Right?”

Platinum Haze paused to think this over before giving the filly a warm smile. “We suppose it does, but we

suspected you were more mature than us anyway.”

“So,” Flare piped in, reminding me he was still in the room, “what was your cutie-mark before, er, whatever happened to you happened?”

Platinum Haze stared at Flare with unblinking yellow eyes for longer than was comfortable before answering in a shocking quiet voice, “We do not remember.”

The quiet in the room was almost deafening in its intensity, with the only sound being the ticking of my pipbuck's radiation detector to break up the silence.

Eventually, much to everyone's delight, Platinum Haze spoke up, “Oh, we had meant to inquire as to the nature of your visit. While we are always thankful for company, we understand the intrinsic danger in visiting us in this state.”

That seemed like as good a distraction from the unnerving awkwardness of the previous topic as any. “Well. I wanted to ask you if you could watch Serenity, if the other pony I was going to ask isn't able. Me and Flare have a job to do, and after everything that's happened, I really don't want to bring her into the tunnels with me.”

Platinum Haze nodded slowly. “We suppose we could, but it would be safer to house her with somepony else, given our current state. More radiation in her condition would be dangerous.”

“I know.” I sighed and rubbed my forehead. “It's a dumb thing to ask, and I'm really hoping Pearly can help. It's just I need someone to make sure she is okay, and safe. I can't leave her alone with everything going on, and if Pearly can't help, you're the only pony I can really trust. So it'd be either with you, or going with me, and there would be radiation either way.”

“You're the backup plan,” Flare said, “because apparently she comes up with those now. Most likely Pearly will just handle the brat.” Serenity stuck her tongue out at Flare for that, and I'm sure he would have returned the favour if not for the mask. “So it was mostly an excuse for Silver to make kissy faces with you.”

“Fuck off, Flare.” Came my obvious response.

Platinum Haze gave a slight smirk. “Ah, we see. Well we cannot disapprove of such a noble goal.” This almost had me blushing, almost. “Though you have piqued our interest in to what exactly your current mission entails.”

I quickly, and succinctly, explained our current mission. Well, I'd attempted to, but Flare kept correcting me on the details and I ended up letting him explain it all. It wasn't that I didn't understand the mission, I'm just not a detail-oriented pony.

Platinum Haze just nodded along to our description and waited for us to finish before speaking. “We see. We wish to make an odd request.” There was a lull in her speaking which made me realize she was asking me if she could ask a question. Which was odd, but I nodded anyway. “We request we assist you in this task. Given the explanation of the mission at hand, it would not violate our non-aggression policies, and we believe our magic may be of some use. In addition, we must admit to being rather bored here alone, and we would very much enjoy being a beneficial partner.”

My answer was obvious, but I looked over to Flare to see what he thought. “There's going to be plenty of radiation down there no matter what, so welcome aboard!”

“What!” Serenity said loudly. “Now I *have* to come with y'guys! C'mon. It ain't fair. Please, pretty please.” When nopony immediately answered her, she realized her fate was sealed and resorted to pouting. “This sucks.”

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We arranged to meet Platinum Haze outside the BS, but with the understanding it might just be to escort Serenity back to the room on the off chance Pearly was unable to help. To that extent the three of us went down to the main floor of the BS to find it still in the same organized chaos as it was before. The makeshift tents and walls reminded me of a similar scene I saw back in Bridle Hope when it was being besieged by the

Crimson Hoof, though the BS was a bit more organized. Or rather, it certainly appeared to be with the smattering of armed guards standing around to control movement through the floor, and the considerably larger amount of guards surrounding the pit in the centre of the room where the supplies were being stored.

“Now...” I said my eyes scanning through the mess of tents and ponies, “how to find Pearly.” That part looked like it was going to be more difficult than I’d hoped for. Until I remembered I had a secret weapon. “Flare?”

“Right, right.” He flapped his wings thrice before taking off into the air. He soared high above the din of the floor and circled around the room. I could see a few ponies stop to watch him nervously, and nearly all of the guards tensed up at the sight. I was starting to think maybe Mr. House didn’t foster much trust for pegasi in his ranks.

It took him a few minutes, but eventually he came back down to us with a look of confidence on his face (which I could tell because he took his helmet off once we got down to the radiation free main room.) and told us, “I found her. Right this way; follow me. No staring at my ass on the way.” He walked away briskly and I had to wonder what he was talking about, because when I looked at his ass it was just metal plating like the rest of his armour. “Pervert.” Flare said turning his head slightly to catch me staring... which I wouldn’t have been if he hadn’t said anything.

Serenity snickered at me, though I don’t think she really got the joke, and I went and followed the tricky pegasi anyway. He led us through the crowds of ponies (luckily most gave him a wide berth) until we we found Pearly.

She wasn’t alone, and it didn’t look to be the good sort of not alone either. She was partially cornered by two ponies I didn’t recognize. One was a sea green unicorn mare with a light blue mane, and light red unicorn stallion with a yellow mane. “Who else could have taken it?” I could hear the unicorn mare raise her voice as I closed in. “We saw you walking by away from our tent, the same night it went missing.”

“So?” Pearly asked nearly as loudly. “It don’t mean Ah took yer damn food; Ah don’t even know which tent is yers.”

“I’m sure you’ll talk when we tell Mr. House-” The mare was cut off by Pearly.

“Tell’em what, pray? That’cha saw me near yer tent, an’ what? Ya don’t think he got more ta deal with than paranoid delusions?” Pearly growled. “Ah ain’t got time fer this, so ‘less ya gonna start making sense, y’all ken get outta my face.”

The mare shoved at Pearly with hoof.. “Listen up, you little bitch: if I catch you near my shit again, I’ll have you strung up by your fucking ears.” And for a split second I thought Pearly was going whip out her shotgun, but she seemed to catch sight of me walking up and stopped.

“I am sure,” I said, making my presence known, “that Mr. House. Would like to know about this. Accusations like this. They are very serious.” The two unknown ponies turned to look at me, their eyes falling quickly on my cybernetic foreleg. “However. He hates to have his time wasted.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” The mare asked, her eyes still on my leg.

“Hired Gun.” The mare scoffed for a second until I finished, “Designation: Starmare. Of the Hizai.”

That caught her haughty voice in her throat for a good few seconds. “Oh... Well... I... we.” She looked over to the stallion, who did nothing but glower at me. “We wouldn’t want to waste his... time.”

“Then I guess. You have nothing to do here. Unless you have evidence.” I raised an eyebrow at her, trying to look inquisitive, but she shook her head.

“No... not yet. I’ll, we’ll be back though.” She huffed and turned around, and when the stallion didn’t immediately follow, she grabbed his mane with her magic to help him along. The two of them trotted off at a brisk pace away from us.

“Yeah, you better run!” Serenity decided it was a good idea to shout at them, and oddly enough it really did make them start running faster.

“Thanks, hun.” I turned back to Pearly when she started talking, her hoof rubbing her forehead in annoyance. “Them two...” She sighed and turned towards a tent that was made by draping a blanket over rows of slot machines, with a second working as a door. She started to lift the blanket as if to invite us in, but turned to look again, “Actually, Ah’d thought t’be polite an’ invite ya folk inside, but Ah’m ‘fraid there won’t be ‘nough room. We good to talk out here, hun?”

“Uh, sure.” My eyes glanced over to where the two ponies went. “What was that all about?”

“Nothin’ ya wanna get all worked up ‘bout, Ah assure you,” she said emphatically. “Well, them two just think Ah went outta mah way ta go’n steal their food. Ah don’t really blame ‘em, t’be honest. There’s some folk what’re riled up ‘cause folks like them what work at the powerplant been gettin’ more food rations, and some have taken to stealin’ from ‘em ta ‘make it fair,’ ‘r someshit. Ah didn’t do it, but Ah musta wandered by their tent at the wrong time, and since Ah’m the new girl ‘round an’ nopony trusts me, it falls t’me.” She sighed. “Not that Ah ain’t grateful Ah’m here; much better’n starvin’ in the tunnels,”

“Mr. House still has the power plant running?” Flare asked walking up beside me.

“You betcher feathers he does.” Pearly smirked. “Ya see these lights?” She pointed up to the lights hanging from the ceiling, “They don’t run on friendship, Ah’ll tell ya that. Somepony has to go into the radiation to make sure it’s running, so they get extra food for their efforts.”

“I’m sure he’s charging extra to the other gangs,” Flare said with some confidence.

“Beats me hun, nopony really keeps me up to date with his policies...” She looked between the three of us. “But somethin’ gives me tha feelin’ there’s more to this visit than food crises an’ power politics. What can Ah help ya with, hun?”

“I was hoping for a favour,” I said.

“Well, ain’t nothin’ Ah wouldn’t do for my favourite overly chaste mare”. My cheeks flushed slightly. “And ya did get me inta here right ‘fore everything went bad, so Ah owe ya pretty big.”

“The thing is. Flare and I have something of an important job to do. And well. Serenity is still recovering from radiation sickness. We don’t want her to risk coming with us.”

“Not another word.” Pearly raised a hoof. “Ya need me ta watch the little tyke to make sure nothin’ happens to her, that right, hun?”

“Yeah. Basically that. The mission isn’t supposed to be dangerous,” I admitted. “But. Knowing my luck.”

“Knowing your luck, you’ll be missin’ another body part by the time it’s over?” Her eyes fell on my new robotic hind-leg, “Like that one right there; ah’m gunna guess there’s a story behind that.”

“Yeah!” Serenity perked up. “There were scorpions, and I saved momma’s life!”

Pearly’s gaze softened when she looked at the small filly. “Oh I’m sure you did, sweetie.” Pearly moved her hoof to brush aside the blanket that acted as the door to her tent. “Why don’t you come inside and tell me all about it.”

Serenity nodded but turned to me first. The little filly stared up at me with her big grey eyes, and it wasn’t until she whined, “Moooom,” that I thought to lean down. She wrapped her hooves around my neck as soon as it was in range, and I carefully put my foreleg around her shoulders. “If ya lose another body part, or like, die’er somethin’, then I’ll never ever *ever* forgive you, okay?”

“Okay...” I answered softly, releasing the embrace, “You be safe too, and make sure to listen to Pearly.” As much as she listened to anypony, anyway. “I promise I’ll be back as soon as possible, and you’ll be able to come with next time, and... I love you.”

Serenity loosened her hold on my neck. “Love you too, Momma,” she said as she let go completely and turned to walk into Pearly’s little... shack thing. She stopped halfway in to turn around at me and narrowed her eyes. “Never *ever* forgive you.” She repeated one last time before vanishing.

Pearly rested a hoof on my shoulder. “Nothin’ll happen to her—I’d risk my life to keep the little darlin’ safe.”

“I know...” My eyes were still on the entrance to the tent. “I just worry...”

“Good!” Pearly said, leaning over to plant a quick kiss on my cheek. “You're suppose to worry, and I think you of all ponies could stand to worry a little more about the consequences of your actions.” I really couldn't argue with that. While it was true I probably spent too much time looking back at my failures, I seemed to fail consistently with seeing the results of my actions before I perform them. “So, just be quick, and come back safe.” With that Pearly too vanished inside her makeshift tent leaving me and Flare alone.

With no more pressing matters the two of us made our way through the throngs of ponies in the casino towards the exit which was still heavily guarded under Tight Lips' watchful eye.

The mare smiled and waved at us when she saw us walking towards her, “Hey!” she yelled over. “Heard you two were coming. I'll open the door lickity-split—don't want to keep Mr. House's mission waiting.”

“Uh...” I said walking over to the always-excitable head of security. “Thanks.”

“I see that little darling of a filly isn't with you, I hope she feels better soon.” The mare gave me an overlarge smile. “I'd hate for anything to happen to her—she's such a sweet filly. Probably best she's left behind though, what with all the radiation,” Tight Lips said in her usual chatty manner as she moved to unlock the door, “And of course it's safer inside here, much safer.”

The doors cracked open enough to let the harsh sun from outside shine through the cracks. My pipbuck started sticking immediately, though it was a slow steady tick. Without another word Flare and I stepped once more outside, ready to face the radiation once more.

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“New day, same radiation-blasted hell-hole, but hey, it's home.” The voice of New Haygas boomed from my pipbuck as Flare, Platinum Haze, and I made our way to a tunnel entrance. It had been a while since I'd listened to the radio, and it was about time I checked in on the news. I knew it would be bad, but I had to know how bad. “Now folks, you know how I hate to be a downer, but I don't have a lot of good news for you this lovely day, so let's try to speed through this quickly so you can listen to soothing tunes.”

“Update on the warfront, first of all. The NCA has found a series of secret bases in the old train tunnels outside of the city. NCA officials admitted the bases were troublesome with how close they were to the city, and how far away they were from Minotaur land, but stressed that they cleared all the bases of minotaurs and they were confident no further bases remain. Meanwhile, the battle over the west canyon bridge is still locked in a stalemate. NCA officials declined to comment on the state of the battle.

“In sad news it has been confirmed that a body found in the aftermath of the Train Station Disaster was in fact that of local hero, Pinprick, A.K.A. The Hero of Wending. Not much is known about the enigmatic pony, and by all accounts she appeared out of nowhere with a filly by her side just in time to save the town of Wending in the north from destruction. Her heroic deeds seemed to spread across the northern villages culminating in a climactic defence of the trading town of Bridle Hope from raiders where she saved most of the population by organizing an escape. She soon found her way to Dise proper where she teamed up with local wackjob 'The Batmare' to take down an illegal drug dealing gang in Parasite Mound. No pony knows for sure what she was doing at the train station, what exactly killed her, or where her filly sidekick is, but it can be assured she was doing her best to stop the tragedy. She was a great pony who gave her life to save others, and she will be sorely missed. The Watchers have stated plans to hold a funeral for the mare, but gave no more information.”

It really stung how little New Haygas seemed to know about Pinprick. The way he was talking about made her out to be some goddess-like figure that was too good for this rotten world, and I knew Pinprick would have hated to be thought of like that. Pinprick was a good pony by the end, but she was more than that. She was a flawed and troubled mare who was trying to make up for an unsavoury past. She deserved to be remembered for what she was, because knowing where she came from made her sacrifice mean more.

And where was The Batmare's eulogy? She did just as much as Pinprick if not more, and The Batmare's sacrifice actually saved hundreds of lives, but she got nothing. It seemed unfair.

“Speaking of the Watchers, they are still giving out free Rad-away at stations throughout the tunnels. If you have foals, they ask you bring them with you so they know you're not lying. Clean Cutt, leader of the Watchers has stated emphatically that he understands how desperate everypony is, but if you try to push to the front of the line, you will not be given any rad-away. So please, everypony, be patient; you'll get your rad-away so long as you just stay calm.” The radio pony coughed sharply into the microphone for a second before cutting a sound away. A few seconds later he was back, “Sorry about that everypony. Well that's your news for this hour, time for some music to take your mind away.”

Platinum Haze looked over at me when music I didn't recognize started to play through my pipbuck, “If we are not mistaken, this Pinprick was a friend of yours, correct? Once we are done here, we will see if we can ascertain details on the planned funeral.”

We made our way east of the central water fountain into the former slums. They were always confusing: a mishmash of broken buildings and hastily repaired shacks all climbing over each other. It almost reminded me of Marefort, at least it had when it was full of ponies. Now that it was empty, it just creeped me out.

“No,” I said softly, “she wasn't a friend. Well. She was. It's complicated.” I sighed, my eyes scanning the empty hovels and broken grey streets. “I was there when she died, you know.” I closed my eyes, the memories coming back to me. “She was trying to save my life when Dragonslayer killed her. She said... that I saved her. I think she meant like. I saved her from herself. Because who she was before was... unpleasant.” I opened my eyes and looked over to Platinum Haze. “I don't want to go to her funeral. It's not for me. It's for ponies who've heard of her on the radio, ponies who want a martyr. It's not for ponies who knew her.”

“Wow, Hired,” Flare said from my other side. “That sounded almost deep. Who knew you had it in you? And where did you learn the word “martyr”? I'm not saying it's a bad thing, just a bit surprising coming from you.”

I shoved Flare's side lightly with a hoof. “Fuck off, Flare.” The pegasus dramatically stumbled into a nearby wall.

“We find your relationship odd,” Platinum Haze said as she waited for Flare to get back in line. “If we did not know any better, we would assume that you two did not get along.”

“Oh we don't!” Flare said brushing off his armour. “We actually hate each other. I can't stand this insufferable bitch, and she's ugly as sin.”

“Flare is an idiotic pretty-stallion who is not nearly as funny as he thinks he is. It's a blessing from Celestia I haven't crushed his annoying skull beneath a hoof,” was my reply.

“See...” Haze's melodic voice was tinged with confusion, “We are unsure if we are supposed to laugh at this interaction, or if we are to pull you two apart. It is confusing to us.”

“There's the trick!” Flare said. “Our friendship is based on abusive behaviour and mutual hate. It's not that complicated.”

“Really though,” I said as we came upon one of the entrances to the tunnels, “you're not as funny as you think you are.”

The three of us went into the entrance and down into the abyss. As soon as we came out of the entrance into the tunnels proper I could feel my shoulder began to burn; Platinum Haze had turned invisible behind us. I knew it was for the best, but sometimes it was difficult to get used to the burning sensation. It didn't help that most of my hind-leg was cybernetic too, now.

The tunnels had not changed much from when Flare took me through them a few days before. But the ponies in the tunnels seemed to. Maybe it was just my mind comparing them to the healthy ponies in the BS but the crowds of ponies looked pale and unnaturally skinny. They walked around with their heads hung low as if they were being pushed down by some unseen weight.

There were no crazy ponies on soapboxes calling for armed insurrection this time, but it really wouldn't have surprised me if there were. We didn't stay in the populated parts of the run down tunnels for long, because our route took us down to the lower levels of the tunnels that were less populated, and because Platinum Haze

would have a really difficult time dodging ponies while invisible.

After shoving our way past sick looking ponies that gave us dirty looks, presumably for my cybernetics and Flare's armour, we made our way into an unused side passage that led to a stairwell. On the wall to our right I saw something newly scribbled on the wall: 'The Shufflers Wanted This'.

"Shufflers?" I asked no pony in particular.

Flare was the one who chose to answer, as he often did when it let him flex his knowledge. "It's a derogatory word for ghouls." My mind went back to the two ghouls I actually knew. Mr. House seemed to be paranoid that the tunnel dwellers blamed him, and the only other ghoul I knew was Lucky, and I wasn't even sure if he was still alive. "There used to be some living in the tunnels before... they weren't really allowed in the city proper before."

"We are incredulous. Are you seriously proposing that there are those who blame ghouls for the radiation?" Platinum Haze (who else would use the word incredulous?) said.

"Desperate ponies will believe stupid things if it gives them someone to blame." Flare sighed as we started down the staircase. "It's just the way ponies get."

"We shall concede to you that point as we can find no inaccuracy in it, however it still strikes us as implausible that ghouls are being blamed. As previously stated, they had no power, and it seemed most did not know any had been living in this area. Unless someone is purposely spreading rumours of the atrocity being caused by ghouls, it is unlikely such a belief would spring up."

"Maybe one guy got paranoid and started spreading it, but that's what the word is down here. Or so I've heard." We continued our way down the winding staircase further than I'd actually thought the tunnels went. It seemed odd to me to go down so far, but that's what the map told me.

"We suppose so, but we are still highly suspicious," Platinum Haze finished as we reached the bottom.

I knew that it was the bottom of the tunnels because apart from the landing in the stairs everything was... unfinished. The walls were complete, but the ceiling was still bare stone with jagged rocks jutting out oddly, as if it were a natural cave, The floor was bare stone and packed dirt and nothing else. The whole place smelled stale and stagnant, like nothing had been touched in years. There were no lights anywhere, apart from the landing, and the darkness of the tunnel was way too close, as if it were actually eating what paltry light was left.

"Brings back memories..." Flare said quietly beside me. Platinum Haze looked confused at the remark, and looked over at me to answer, but the answers were ones I didn't want to give.

"Yeah..." I sucked in a deep breath and listened carefully to the silence. We were so far down the radiation hadn't penetrated yet, and I wasn't close to Haze, so my pipbuck wasn't ticking. The only sound was breathing, our breathing. When I was confident I couldn't hear the sound of wind I stepped away from the stairs towards the darkness.

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The amber glow of my pipbuck did little to help penetrate the darkness, but combined with the glow from Platinum Haze's horn and the headlamp on Flare's mask (which I hadn't known he had) we managed to see somewhat in the gloom. At first no pony said anything, but eventually Flare started talking to break the overwhelming tension that filled the air.

"... so I ended having to mop all the floors in the building as punishment!" Flare ended his story with a barking laugh, and even Platinum Haze gave a diminutive chuckle. I cracked a smile, but I was too nervous to laugh.

"We are surprised that someone as mischievous as yourself managed to ascend to the ranks of captain in an organization renown for their strict policy." I don't think Platinum Haze meant that as an insult, but I was worried Flare would take it as one.

"Well they did kick me out, you know." Flare gave another short laugh before continuing. "Actually, I used to

be a good soldier. Well, decent. Pretty good for me. I worked hard for my rank, though I mostly did it to keep my mind focused and off... other things.”

“Other things,” I said slowly, turning my gaze to the pegasus. “So this happened right after that mercenary of yours disappeared.” I remembered the story Flare told before of an old colt-friend of his vanishing while going to fight rad-scorpions.

“Bingo. It was upsetting, and the brass was on my back about it. I needed an outlet for my frustrations so I spent the next several years working my ass off.” Flare sighed a little. “For all the good it did. It just put me in charge at Bitter Steel, and I wasn't ready... not for that.”

“We are confused,” Platinum Haze said slowly, her voice echoing through the cavernous hallway. “We do not appear to have enough relevant information to understand this conversation.”

“That's for the best,” Flare said sadly. “It's not a good story, neither of them. You're better off not knowing. See, the the truth of why me and Hired here are friends is because we really have no choice. We've been through so much, and know so much about each other, we're destined to either be best friends, or mortal enemies. Since I like living, I decided on the friends option.”

“Oh, we suppose that is a suitable reason. We have heard some stories about what you have done, and your hypothesis seems acceptable.”

“I'm a story pony, ask my cutie-mark.” Flare said as he flapped his way over some rubble that blocked the path. “But some stories don't do justice to the truth. I could tell a thousand ponies what I saw... what *we* saw in that celestia-forsaken mountain, but nopony would truly understand.”

Platinum Haze flew over the rubble as well, and lifted me rather suddenly with her magic, almost giving me a heart attack. “We did not mean to imply we understood exactly, only that the concept seemed plausible.”

“I know, I just have a flair for the dramatics.”

When Platinum Haze put me down and my heart stopped racing I looked over at Flare, “That'd explain the name I suppose.”

“Pony parents do have a thing for prophetic naming don't they?” Flare seemed amused at the idea as we continued through the dark. “I've already figured yours out, Silver.” I raised an eyebrow in his direction giving him permission to continue with whatever silly thing he was going to say. “Your coat is silver, and everywhere you go looks like a storm has just pass through! It's a perfect name.” Once again it wasn't funny enough to coax a laugh out of me, but I did smile. “You, though,” he pointed a wing at Platinum Haze, “I don't know why you're named that.”

“Oh, we know why.” The alicorn smiled. “We have named ourselves Platinum Haze.” I guess if I could name myself Hired Gun, she could name herself whatever she wanted. “The reason for naming ourselves that is that we can recall that before unity the word 'Platinum' was present in our name, but we cannot remember the rest, thus 'Haze'.”

“You can't remember your old name?” Flare asked carefully, he was probably worried about it being a more sensitive matter than Haze was letting on.

“There is much about our former life we cannot remember clearly. Our name not the least of all,” Platinum Haze said in an almost wistful tone. “Oh, we have a problem,” she said as the three of us stopped. She was right about that last part. Before us the tunnel split in three separate ways. What was worse when I checked my pipbuck map there was only supposed to be one tunnel. Whoever was building the deep tunnels was apparently not following instructions.

“Which way?” Flare asked, and it was a really good question, but I didn't really know the answer.

“We believe it is this way.” Platinum Haze pointed towards the rightmost tunnel. “We can feel wind, which would indicate that an exit lies this direction.”

“Yeah... sure.” It was as good an answer as any, so we headed down that tunnel. For some reason my shoulder was hurting more than usual, but between Platinum Haze's magic and the fact it had been painfully

long since I had an Med-X, it meant nothing.

Quickly though I got the feeling we'd made the wrong choice. While it was true I could hear wind as we went further and further down the tunnel, I couldn't actually feel it. Also, the tunnel seemed even more unfinished. I was no tunnel expert but it seemed like the latest to be built, as the only thing marking it as something other than a naturally-made tunnel was the wooden support beams attached to the plain rock walls.

We didn't have to travel that far for my suspicions to be confirmed, as we soon reached the end of the tunnel. It wasn't just a bare wall though, at the very end of the tunnel was a giant drill like machine pointed at the uncut wall. It was actually really impressive looking and the sort of thing I am sure Serenity would have loved to see.

"I guess this is the wrong way," Flare said wandering over to the giant drill. "Kind of a waste of time."

"But..." Platinum Haze stood back looking confused, "We are sure there was wind this direction. Certain of it."

"Hmm." I could hear wind too, so it had to be coming from somewhere. Since the route in front of us was just a solid block of stone and had now answered, I looked up. This proved one of the smarter things I did that day as I found the answer. Above of the ceiling seemed to very... cracked and worn, and through one of the larger cracks I could see a hint of metal and some light. "I think. We're under another floor." I pointed up.

My two companions looked up. "Ah," Flare said. "That makes sense, it looks unstable up there. They probably shut down tunnelling out of concern of a cave in." I guess that made sense.

Platinum Haze frowned deeply as she stared up at the cracks, "We... suppose. We are sorry for the mistake..." There looked to be something bothering her, but I didn't ask. Instead I walked over to where Flare was to check out the giant drill.

"Yup," Flare chirped. "Guess we'll try the next two. So much fun." His voice dripped sarcasm.

"Lets just rest a minute here," I said taking a deep breath.

"Rest? C'mon you can't be tired already, if we need to stop to get our bearings it should be at the crossroads anyway, not here," Flare said, but didn't actually move to start back down the tunnel.

"Yeah yeah." To be completely honest, I was just stopping to try and think of an excuse to use some Med-X. I was starting to crave the stuff, but I didn't want Haze to know about... that. Maybe if I pretended to stub my hoof or something. As I tried to think of a good excuse I casually leaned onto the back panel of the giant drill, an act which was incredibly stupid.

With the sound like a dragon roaring, the machine sparked into life.

"What, shit!" I stood straight up as the world started to shake. Slowly the drill started to spin, and as it did tiny rocks rained from the ceiling onto my head.

"Hired... Hired, make it stop!" Flare said looking around in panic.

"I'm trying!" The panel didn't make any sense. There was so many buttons I didn't even know which one I accidentally pressed. I tried pushing some at random but it didn't seem to help.

A giant boulder crashed into the ground behind me.

"Just book it!" Flare sped away towards the exit to the tunnel.

"Silver! We advise immediate withdrawal for your own safety!" Right... right Haze. I turned to run towards her, but that's when everything came crashing down.

I heard them before they came, and my eyes shot up. The entire ceiling was falling. I kept running, but I knew it was too late. My natural luck and incredibly tough body wouldn't be able to survive this one. I didn't give up though, I kept moving against the odds.

And against the odds, nothing hit me. Not because I was too fast (I wasn't) but instead they bounced off a glimmering purple shield. My gaze shot back over to Haze, whose horn was shimmering purple. I kept

running until I reached the end of the shield, and when Haze lowered it I ran over to her to give her a hug.

“Thank you,” I said breathlessly, “You saved my life.” And she was cute too, so I kissed her on the cheek for thanks. My shoulder was burning even more as I hugged her, but I figured that was due to being so close to Haze's horn.

“Hired...” Even through the mask I could tell there was something troubled in Flare's voice. “Hired...” I glanced over from haze to him to see him staring at something on the floor. Behind me. “Hired... w-we need to fucking go. Now!”

I let go of Haze and turned to see what scared Flare so much.

And I saw Wildfire. She was standing on top of a rubble pile that was half rock, half ruins from the tunnel above us, and right in front of her was a glowing orb. “Did you forget me?” Wildfire asked as blood seeped from her lips.

“No... no no no...” My eyes went wide and I turned around in panic, only to run into Pinprick, a dagger still jutting out of her neck.

“You... were suppose to save me...” Pinprick said.

“You're dead!” I just had to remember that, I couldn't let them get to me, and I couldn't close my eyes. I remembered the orb. If I closed my eyes memories would come back, memories that were impossible to escape. I couldn't go back there. Fuck. How did it end up here. I should have noticed. We buried the orb, but not far enough.

I ran through the ghost of Pinprick, her body dissipating in my wake.

“W-what.” Haze stuttered, “We do not understand, what is that, why...”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Flare grab onto her neck and turn her around to help her along, “When we say run, fucking run!”

We ran.

I should've realized. I should've noticed. I should've remembered. I should've seen it. I should've... fuck....

Images flashed past: vague memories, sounds, images. It was like before. The orb, it made memories come back. Words from my past haunting me. It wasn't as powerful as Simple Heart himself, granting your wishes in dreams, just memories, but they were enough. I had to keep my eyes open. I couldn't fall into the trap again.

“Don't close your eyes,” I yelled over to Haze.

“W-what? We... we will not, but why!” She yelled back, though it seemed unnatural coming from her. “It feels right, we feel tired...”

“NO!” Me and Flare shouted in unison.

“We... we do not see the harm.” We turned into the four way intersection. “We...”

“Haze!” I stopped to turn towards her pressing a hoof against her, “You have to promise me you won't close your eyes. It's dangerous; it's... Haze...” Shit. She slowed to a stop as a my hoof pressed against her, and I could see her eyes drooping. “Haze... Fuck! HAZE!” I shook her with my fore-hooves.

It was too late. She stood stark still with her eyes completely closed, the spell of the orb wrapped around her, holding her. Like others we saw in the tunnel so long ago she could be stuck in that memory for as long as she lived. I had to stop that from happening! I had too...

“She's gone, isn't she?” Flare said, looking over at Haze, but something caught his eyes and he turned slightly to face it. “Go away.” I heard him hiss, but I pretended not to notice.

“She's gone...” I grit my teeth in annoyance. There had to be something... “Help me with her, I need to get her lying down.” Sleeping standing up really wasn't that hard, especially with the spell helping her, so I had to press against the backs of her legs to get them to fold. With Flare's help we were able lower her to the

ground.

“What are you planning?” Flare asked me as I stared down at the poor alicorn.

“Do you think it works the same as Simple Heart?” I didn't look over at Flare. “The magic is similar... but different. I could enter your dreams, in the mountain. Do you think that was on purpose?”

“Well,” Flare said, “I told you how I'd planned to be a psychologist, a long time ago right? When I was a colt.” That sounded vaguely familiar. “Well I got the idea in my head by reading a novel about a doctor who used a spell to make ponies relive traumatic events, and then he'd go into the dream to watch them and use what he saw to help them recover. You said Simple Heart was a psychologist before he went all... crazy, right?” I nodded again. “Maybe it's the same sort of idea.”

“So...?”

“So if it worked in the mountain, it might work here... and what other choice do we have?” None.... None whatsoever. “I'll watch over the two of you; I can handle the orb. I've done it before... just... please, don't be too long.”

“Yeah.” I lowered my head, pressing my forehead against Platinum Haze's, “I promise.”

The world swirled around me.

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*Is Celestia A Goddess?*

The question was scrawled in bright red over the entrance of a burning building; a single-story shack, half pre-war, half scrap, sitting alone in an arid brown field. I hesitated to enter through the fire, but when I approached, I found that the fire gave no heat and my hoof passed through the flame with nothing but the warming sensation of direct sunlight. I looked up at the message and felt like it was asking me directly.

“Yes.” I answered the question, though nopony was around to hear me. It seemed important.

The door opened with an echoing creak. I stuck my head inside to look around. It seemed to be larger on the inside. There was a single bed in the room, but instead of a wooden type like you might see in Marefort, it was a stable bed, only, unlike the ones I've seen, brand new. It was the only thing of stable-make in the room. There was a dining room table, and a fridge, but they both looked like they actually belonged in the wasteland. Importantly, the inside of the house was not on fire.

“Some memory...” I mumbled to myself, stepping inside the building to take a closer look. There didn't seem to be another exit to the house, but Haze wasn't in it. She had to be somewhere, it was her dream after all. Something flickered in the corner of my eyes, and when I turned, I saw a staircase.

Though I was certain it had not been there previously, I walked up to it. The stairs led nowhere, just ending abruptly at the ceiling. They were cracked and bowed, definitely not able to hold my weight, even if they had lead somewhere. The oddest thing about the staircase was, the longer I stared at them, the more blurry they got, until the stairs vanished altogether as if they were never there. Which was the most likely option as they didn't actually go anywhere.

So the answers wouldn't be found up the non-existent stairs, so I moved over to the bed to try and figure out why it didn't fit. Maybe this house (which I assumed to be Platinum Haze's old house before that 'Unity' thing) was near a stable and they stole a bed from it? It was the only answer I could think of when I studied the bed. Out of curiosity, I lifted the covers to see if anything underneath.

Oh. There's a pony-sized bloodstain, and not an old one either; it's bright red, rust-smelling, and wet. If this was a memory, it wasn't like the ones the Orb brought me to last time. Those were happy memories, and this... the thought occurred to me that this might actually constitute as a happy memory to Haze and that was more unnerving still.

With nothing left to study about the bed I turned my way towards the table; perhaps it had some clue to where Haze was. It didn't, not really, but it had... other clues. Lying on the table was piece of paper that

looked like it was been ripped out of a book and re-purposed as a canvass for an artistic kid. Drawn over faded words with crayon with a rather impressive picture (especially since it was clear it was a child's drawing) of three ponies: one was an older male, one a colt, and the third a filly. Their shapes were the only consistent things about the images, as the colours of the ponies changed every time I blinked. The only thing that was static was the silvery colour of the filly's mane.

"This is pointless," I said, to dispel the unnerving fear that was gripping me. "Pointless." I pushed the picture away from me and closed my eyes, trying to concentrate. Haze had to be in this mess somewhere, and I had to find her if I wanted to get out. I needed to rescue her from her dreams, but more and more it seemed I needed to rescue myself as well.

When I opened my eyes, the answer lay before me. A door. This wasn't the same door as before though. The first door was a rickety thing made of sheet metal, and this one was a thick oaken door with a window at head height. When I lowered my head to look through the window, all I saw was my reflection. Groaning in annoyance I looked around the door and saw words above it, in haunting red.

*If So, Why Were You Taken?*

Taken...? From what? To where? I reached out and turned the knob of the door. There was only one way to find out. I looked over my shoulder to make sure there wasn't anything else around, but the room had been engulfed in flame. "Forward then..."

The door opened and I fell through.

Fell is an appropriate word because as soon as I opened the door I dropped at least a meter through the air, landing on my rump in the middle of a caravan.

At least, it had all the makings of a caravan. There were waggons filled with what looked to be goods, and harnesses hooked up to the waggons for ponies or brahmin to pull. But there were no ponies, just emptiness, and silence.

The waggons looked to be as good a place as any for Haze to be hiding in a memory so I walked over to the first one and climbed up to peek my head inside. There was (for the first time so far in this dream) nothing of note. Stacks of bottled water, bags of canned food. A few empty Sparkle~Cola bottles, and not much of anything else. It was a nice change from... whatever was going on at that house.

After being confident that there was no Haze in that wagon I moved up to check the second of three. As I peeked into the interior of the cart something caught in my throat. It was full of chains. Just filled completely up with all assortments of chains. Some long and thick, others short and thin. More chains than I'd ever seen in my life. I backed off the second cart, and felt my back-hoof clank against something.

Looking down at the ground I saw more chains, but these were different. There were two rows of chains running beside each other down the length of the caravan. Interspersed through the chains were small shackles in groups of four. Nervously I walked over to the shackles and put my hoof over one shackle. Now, I was big even for an adult, but seeing how much my hoof dwarfed the shackle confirmed the only pony they would have fit were foals...

"Fuck..." I said under my breath. I was nervous, nervous enough to whisper even though nothing was nearby. It felt like something was watching me though, and that it was going to make its presence known any second. Still, there was one last wagon to check, and I had to. I don't know why I had to, but I did.

Creeping my way over there I slowly and carefully peered into the final cart.

*If So, Why Were You Beaten And Broken?*

Red words looked up at me, mocking me. I hated the words. I tried to slam my cybernetic hoof through them, but it only bounced off. With a quiet growl I backed away from the cart, and ignored the ever growing row of chains on the ground. I still had no answers, and no Haze.

There was only one thing I could think of to do, and that was to follow the rows of chains. They seemed to extend now far past the frozen caravan into the distance. I gritted my teeth and started walking beside the

rows of chains. As I walked I could hear voices, whispers. There were giggles, sobs, and cries for help all mixed together into a cacophony of sound at the edges of my perception.

It didn't get louder as I walked, but it did get noisier. More voices joined the mix, more sounds. Most were foals, but not all, and the further I walked more adult voices joined the nearly silent din. Until I hit the end, rather suddenly. The chains kept going to the horizon, but I was forced to stop at a cliff face.

There was a city below the cliff, grand and stretching. But it wasn't always... the same. It changed, twisting and morphing. At first it seemed like a huge seaside city with a giant pony statue out resting in a harbour. Then it appeared to be an inland city of smoke and grime, with pink balloons floating about looking almost like pony heads. It slowly transformed into what was almost unmistakably Eye Glow, complete with glowing crater.

Then, finally, it turned to a ruined city. Skyscrapers were topped over, resting on others precariously, and the rooftops were all linked up with hastily made bridges. Below the bridges, I could see, was water. This city was flooded nearly completely, and it was unlike anything I'd seen before. It stayed like that, the flooded city, until I looked away from it. I really hoped I didn't have to search through that to find Haze.

My eyes gaze down, looking perhaps for some path off the cliff into the city, but what I saw was a door. It was hanging perpendicular to the cliff face so that when I looked down it was staring back up at me. "You've got to be kidding me." And just like any time anypony ever said that sentence, the door was not kidding. "Fuck."

So I jumped. To tell the truth, I hadn't actually expected to fall, and I definitely hadn't expected to be suddenly plummet face first towards the door. If it were a real door it would have shattered under my girth, instead it just shook and opened slowly.

I landed on my hooves on the other side of the door.

After calming my nerves with a few quick breaths I looked up to gather my bearing. Just my luck, I was staring straight at a bullet.

I jumped back and swung at it, knocking the bullet away. It spun around through the air before stopping once more in mid air still pointing at me. Right. More dream trickery. I just... had to keep my head about me. Keep calm. Deep breaths. Figure this out.

There were many more bullets, and each and every one pointed directly at me. Ignoring them (and it was hard) I saw I was in... some kind of cavernous building. The floor was mostly clear of debris, and the regularly-spaced support pillars were still in good condition.

Something bright and yellow caught my eye from behind one of the pillars. I attempted to walk over there but the wall of lead facing me was blocking my way. It was silly, but the idea of walking into bullets even though they weren't moving and all this was just a dream, still unnerved me. There was no time to be afraid though so I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes.

I could feel each individual bullet press against me, but the feeling didn't last. When I opened my eyes, I saw that each bullet, once I pushed past it, bounced off my skin and spun away, then turned to face me again. It was... odd, but harmless, at least for now, so I kept walking, and soon got used to them bouncing away from me.

When I reached the pillar with the flash I saw what I expected to see. It was a gun, mid muzzle flash. I would say what gun, or even what type, but it changed and shifted, and I couldn't even begin to keep track. There was a floating set of barding close to the gun, but there was no pony inside it. The barding shifted too, but not nearly as fast, and seemed to linger on spiky blood-stained armour.

I looked around the room and suddenly more sets of floating armour and guns appeared. Enough that I could get a sense of the conflict that happened here. The armour that I was staring at continued to shift, and as it did every single piece of armour on that side changed with it, while the other side of the ghostly conflict didn't shift armour. It was always the same.

I walked over to the nearest set of ghostly armour that didn't change, and as bullets bounced off me I began to

see what made that side different. Along with the shifting guns, and static armour, the ghostly form also had a collar on that looked like it was rigged with wires. It didn't take a genius to figure out what those collars were. "Fight or die," I said to myself, imagining the orders they must have been given.

I turned to walk away from the collared ghost, but when I did I didn't hit anything. Where were the bullets? My eyes shot around the room to see they had all turned to point at something else, something on a nearby slate-grey wall. Another door.

This time it was a sliding metallic door that seemed to be trying harder to be fancier technology than it was. As I walked close a set of words written in red above it appeared to me.

*If So, She Has Forgotten You. But I Have Not.*

On the other side I was standing on the edge of a giant crater that reminded me of the one on the outskirts of Dise, though not nearly as large. Across the gaping hole was a large crumbling building that was half swallowed by the giant sink hole. Even with it half destroyed it looked like something resembling a fortress.

I tried to take a step towards the building, but suddenly the world twisted and turned and I ended up standing right in front of the equally impressive entrance. Etched above the entrance were the words, "Maripony: Ministry Of Arcane Science Hub." As I read the name of the building, smaller red words wrote themselves before my eyes.

*I Have Seen Your Wounds, And I Have Wept.*

The doors opened by themselves revealing a grand hallway that looked pristine. Not preserved like the mountain facility, but brand new, almost shining. I hadn't seen anything like it in my life, so I eagerly stepped inside the building. As I did the doors slammed shut behind me.

The cleanliness faded and turned into cracks and rubble. Without so much as a bright flash to signal their coming the hallway was filled with Alicorns. There must have been at least one hundred in the long hallway, each standing side by side with their wings outstretched, lining both sides of the hallway. Green, blue, purple, they went in order, the greens facing greens across the hall, the blues the blues and so on. I had never seen so many in my life, and the staggering number made me feel small and frail. I could only imagine how a regular pony would have felt.

Slowly and carefully, so as not to startle them, I made my way towards the end of the hall.

"*You Are Not Alone. I Can End Your Pain.*" One of the blue alicorns boomed at me nearly making me jump out of my skin.

"Right... good to know." I kept to walking, my hoof steps echoing down the hallways, which I was sure were longer than the building was.

*"I Can Set You Free."*

Another spoke at me, a blue one again. I tried to ignore it but a third blue spoke at me, then a fourth, until all I could hear was their voices booming.

*"I Can Give You Life."*

*"I Can Bring You Hope."*

*"I Can Break Your Chains."*

*"I Can Heal Your Wounds."*

*"Celestia Does Not Care For You."*

*"Not Like I do."*

*"Join Us, And Be Happy."*

*"At Last."*

*"I Can Set You Free."*

The last word 'free' hung in the air for longer than it had any right to as I reached the end. The last door, and I was almost certain it was the last, was the same as the first. Above it were the words, written in red.

### *Unity Is Your Salvation*

I opened the door and walked out onto a catwalk. The room looked like it had once been some sort of factory, but of what I couldn't even begin to guess. Two thirds of the ceiling had collapsed, revealing parts of the complex above, and most of the catwalks were destroyed, except for the portion I was standing on. The floor below me was.. well I'm sure there was a floor there at some point, but all I could see was a thick layer of sludge covered with dust and debris. I swear I saw something swimming in it. There were five vats of something in the room, but three were destroyed. Luckily for me the catwalk I was on ended right above one.

I didn't want to know what had happened here, but... but I had to know. I walked towards the end of the Catwalk, nervousness rising in my guts. When I reached the end I closed my eyes and pointed my head down at the vat, so that when I opened them I would be forced to see whatever it was.

My eyes opened to the sight of a strange green and purple liquid. It was... odd, but not... wait... there was something else. Slowly the liquid swirled and swirled until a pony's face was staring up at me. It mouthed words at me, but I didn't know what, and I wasn't about to stay to ask it! I stood up and moved to turn, but something blocked me...

"This was a good memory." Platinum Haze was beside me, and if she hadn't of talked I would have mistaken her for another vision. "But it is faded. Polluted by other memories. So many memories, so many voices, and I can still hear them." I.. she said I, not we. "Sometimes I cannot remember what happened to me, and what happened to my sisters. Or perhaps my sisters are me..."

"This... this was a good dream?" I asked quietly, still not sure if she knew I was there or just talking to herself. For a good minute I was still not sure, as the blue alicorn stared into the vat with intense yellow eyes.

"Yes... my first one..." She did not stop staring at the vat.

"Those... things. Visions. Did those actually happen... or... what the fuck?" Swearing was probably not the best thing to do at that moment, but dammit I was confused.

"Yes. No..." She paused, her eyes not even glancing over at me. "They are a part of the memory. Things... memories, places. She showed them to me, and my sisters, to open our eyes. To see the blessing she was about to bestow."

"Blessing?" I glanced down at the vat, but grimaced and had to turn away. "You call *that* a blessing."

"Mother gave us purpose. She gave me a reason to continue my existence, to continue living. She gave me happiness, and family. She gave us immortality, and the power never to be hurt again. With her, with Unity, we were never alone." She stomped her hoof so hard I swear it cracked metal. "Then the destroyer came and took it away!" She turned to me, her eyes fierce. "What right has a mortal to judge a goddess! What right did she have to take away our family! She took my home! She took *Everything!* And They call her hero! Lightbringer! She tossed us into a sea, confused and afraid, and she cared not!" Her eyes lowered and she looked to be on the brink of tears. "I can still see the flames of green... I can hear my sisters scream. So much pointless death, and for what and who? Do you... do you know what my mother's last words were?"

I shook my head, unable to form words. I'd never seen her so angry.

"Fly My Children. Save yourselves'..." She turned her head away from me back to the vat. "They call her a monster, but she was not. She was a mother, and everything she did, she did for us. And she did so much for us... she made a deal with the destroyer, knowing she could not be trusted. She risked herself, and sacrificed herself, in an attempt to save our species... mother wanted to make stallions. So we could reproduce, so we could have a larger family. For us. For that... 'crime'... she was murdered. So many of my sisters murdered. Some of my sisters have forgiven her, the destroyer, but I shall not."

"I... I am sorry." Part of me wanted to ask more about this... Goddess. To see what she truly was. Because the last pony I met claiming to be a god was less than forthright. But it didn't matter, not then. The truth could wait.

“You need not be... you did nothing, and the past is past. I cannot fight the past, so I must live for the future. Mother is dead, she cannot come back, but her children live on, and I will do proud by her.” She looked back over at me, her eyes wet with budding tears. “I knew it was a dream. From the start. It was wrong, too many memories, too much.... I am glad you came for me.”

“Not surprised?”

“Should we be?” I opened my mouth to say something but she continued on a tangent. “If nothing else this vision has reminded me of something that once was... before Unity, I had a cutie-mark.” I'd assumed that.

“Two chains, crossed in an 'X'.”

“Oh...” I said quietly, my mind racing trying to think of something positive that could represent.

“I think.” She lowered her head staring deep into the vault. I caught a sight of a tear dripping down from her eye and dropping into the vat below. “It's time to go home.”

She wrapped a wing around me, turned, and fell into the vat pulling me along with her. I screamed. We hit the face in the centre of the vat. I think it was smiling. There was a splash. But I didn't get wet.

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The sound of whispering welcomed my return back to the world of the living. When I opened my eyes again I saw Wildfire standing in front of me, tears in her eyes. “We've been over this,” I said to the ghostly form.

“W-what?” Came a mutter from one side. I turned my head to see Flare staring at me. “Oh... phew, you're awake. I thought I was hearing things, more things, how'd it go, is she-”

“We are fine,” Platinum Haze said, cutting Flare off. Hearing her speak seemed to calm the stallion down.

“We are sorry about that...” I stood up first and offered a hoof to help the alicorn up. She grabbed onto my outstretched leg, and used it to hoist herself back up to all fours. “Thank you.”

“Right. So. We're all good...” He paused. “Should I even ask what happened?”

“Best not,” I said checking my pipbuck's radiation detector to distract myself from the voices in the air. “Not now anyway. We need to go.”

“We... must agree. This place is a danger. This magic, it is a terrible blight, and a lie. It begs us remember the past, live within it, but nothing comes from reliving the past, even the good parts.” Platinum Haze sounded more like she was trying to convince herself more than us.

“Right. Well. I can't argue there. But where are we going? We still don't know the right path, maybe we should just head back,” Flare offered as a solution.

“I think.” I flipped to the map on my pipbuck, and the answer came to me. It was stupid of me not to realize it sooner. There may have been three paths to choose from, but the map only had one, so all we had to do was choose the path that went the same direction as my map said we were suppose to go. Just because there were more tunnels than my map said, didn't mean the path we had to choose changed. As I berated myself internally I pointed to the leftmost tunnel. “This way.” I started walking down it, but neither of my comrades went to follow me. “Trust me.”

Platinum Haze and Flare looked over at each other and then, in silent agreement, started to follow.

We walked as fast as we could without breaking into a full gallop. As we moved down the tunnel we found it getting more and more complete and like the tunnels in the upper levels. The walls became more flat, and uniform, the ceiling was also smoothed down and lights were installed letting out of the oppressive darkness. Most importantly of all, the more we walked, the fainter the whispers of the orb became, until they had vanished altogether.

The tunnel was excessively long, taking us the better part of an hour to get through it, and was almost annoyingly twisty. Which made for a very long, very quiet walk (not counting the whispers) . Though even after we left the range of the orb's powers nopony really spoke for a while.

I eventually broke the silence, “I need to find a way to bring that orb back...”

Platinum Haze said nothing, but looked down at me in confusion, but Flare responded. "Wait. You mean that deal with Simple Heart? Wasn't that whole thing like... abandoned? You know when he tried to kill us..."

"I know," I said softly. "But that complex might be useful. Later. If I could get on his good side..."

"He doesn't have a good side." Flare scoffed at the very idea. "He has a crazy side and a kind of depressing side."

"We are confused once more," Platinum Haze said softly, "Who is this 'Simple Heart' and what connection does he possess to that... thing."

"Simple Heart is the self-proclaimed 'god'..." Flare started, eliciting a confused and slightly upset look from Haze, "of the complex in the mountain near Timber. Some sort of science experiment gone wrong, now he's crazy and mind fucks anyone who enters. The way he spoke it seemed like before the war they somehow siphoned off some of his power and put them in orbs, and Hired agreed to get them back."

"We must agree with Hired then, it may help him to have such an object back. Perhaps it could calm his mind..."

"Easy for you to say." Flare shook his head. "But this isn't ordinary crazy. Besides, even if we wanted to, there's no way anyone is carrying that orb anywhere and staying sane."

Platinum Haze seemed to think about this and responded in turn, "We may be able to come up with a spell to shunt out its powers... we will think on this."

I hoped Haze would come up with something, because I could think of a lot of things to do with that facility if I could gain Simple Heart's trust. Sure, I would still need a way to kick the Steel Rangers out, but if I could... there was just so much technology stored there. And building materials. And if push came to shove and the radiation didn't go away quick enough, maybe the residents of the Disenchantment tunnels could move into it. It had the infrastructure.

That was only if Platinum Haze was able to help, and if Simple Heart appreciated it. Mostly it hinged on him becoming less crazy with the orb...

So that was unlikely, but I'd liked to have some options for once.

I did not have time to think on the subject for long, because very soon the hallway ended. At the end of the hallway was not a staircase (like my map suggested, so it really needed an update) but a door, and a button beside it. It was fairly clear what the door was supposed to be, so I pressed the button and... waited.

"It seems to still be operational," Platinum Haze said. "We wonder if it has seen maintenance, or if it is impressively resistant to the passage of time." That was a good question. My theory was proven right as the elevator in the facility was also still working even though there was no way anyone went there to repair it, and they were both made (or at least paid for) by Wallkirk.

"Two hundred years isn't that long," Flare said dryly.

The elevator dinged when it reached the bottom and opened up. It was much smaller than any other elevator I had seen, and the three of us were squashed together. There were only two buttons on the inside though, so I pressed the higher one. "This is... uncomfortable."

"Yes." Platinum Haze was hunched over awkwardly so her horn didn't go through the ceiling. "We summarize this elevator was designed for a singular pony."

"Hopefully we're not over the weight limit," Flare said, and when I checked the weight limit it occurred to me we actually were. This did not at all help with my previous (completely reasonable) fear of being dragged up a shaft in a rickety metal box.

I held my breath the entire ride up, and I nearly ran out of the box when the doors opened. Before I could even look around a voice spoke over a speaker.

*"Welcome back Mr. Wallkirk. It has been seventy three thousand seven hundred seventy seven days, twenty one hours, thirty three minutes, and four seconds since your last visit."*

Platinum Haze closed her eyes when the numbers were recited before adding, “That is about... five days before the end of the great war.”

Wait... what. “How did you-?” Platinum Haze turned her head to me blinking in confusion. “Math. In your head. Nevermind.”

Flare chuckled and walked past, getting an eyeful of the room. “Maybe Mr. House was right.” That reminded me we were finally there.

I took stock of the room, well, it was more like a hallway. It was a sleek grey hallway that we were at the end of. Behind us there were two elevators, one the one we used to get here, the other presumably that led up into the Clips And Clops. On the ceiling, besides the lights, there were not-so-secret video cameras and speakers. At the far end of the hallway was a door, no doubt where we needed to go. There was also... oh... shit.

“Are those Ponitrons?” Flare asked as two robots rolled up to us.

“*Do not move,*” The two equine-shaped robots said in unison, guns unfolding out of their backs. “*Any action will be taken as host-*”

CRACK CRACK

Bolts of lightning flew from Platinum Haze's horn in quick succession, and faster than I could blink the Ponitrons were nothing more than smoking wrecks.

“I thought you were a pacifist!” Flare said, having at some-point jumped into the air out of shock.

“What?” Platinum Haze stepped forward to kick the scrap of the ponitrons out of the way. “We are indeed secure in our pacifist beliefs, but these are autonomous machines, and destroying them is not a violation. If they had some measure of AI, or the capacity to feel pain, our beliefs would be altered, but they do not, so it is a harmless act.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said quickly following after the alicorn. “Where did you even learn that spell.”

“Unity.” And that was all the answer I needed.

“Sure,” Flare scoffed fluttering after us, “be all cryptic and stuff... Hey Hired, aren't you forgetting that crown thing?” Oh right.

I dug into my saddlebag and pulled out the tiara. I turned it around to study the device to see if it had any, you know, on switch, but it didn't seem to. The only thing that it had was that black amethyst... well, I had to put it on eventually. I did it slowly, carefully. It was super magical, and expensive, and I was leery of memory magic for so many reasons.

“Did anything happen?” Flare asked when it was secure on my head.

“Uh...” I waited... nothing. I tried tapping at it with my hoof. Nothing. “I'm not sure...” Mr. House didn't really give me any instructions. It should have done, like, something, right? Or I should have felt something. It was just... normal, except for making me look gaudy. “Well. He should have given me better instructions.”

“We have no extensive knowledge of the recollector device, so we are unable to assist in this manner,” Platinum Haze said as we continued down to the door at the end of the hall. I was surprised she even knew what the thing was, but I shouldn't have been.

Then came the moment of truth. It was clear at that point that there was something down there, even if we didn't know what, so all we had to do was open the door to see if Mr. House was right, or if we had all just wasted our time. I cracked open the door, and when I was sure it wasn't about to explode or anything, I opened it all the way.

Inside was a computer. No, *the* computer. It was so large it filled up three of the four walls so that when I walked in I was surrounded on all sides. This put to shame every computer I'd seen in my life. I remembered one of the documents I found detailing computer technology stolen from Equestria, but I didn't expect... this.

“Woah...” I said breathlessly. It took me a minute to remember what I was suppose to be doing. My eyes scanned the whole room slowly so that when Mr. House saw the memory he'd see it all. If I couldn't find a

port I'd look at it in greater detail, but until then a glance would do.

“The old kook was right.” Flare walked in behind me. “Colour me impressed.”

“This... this looks like something we have seen before, but we cannot recall.” Platinum Haze spoke her mind out loud.

“If you remember tell me.” Right, so I needed to find a port. Or whatever it was called. Something to hook my pipbuck to. If it was going to be anyplace it was probably going to be on what looked like access panels below the giant screen on the far wall across from the entrance.

I walked over to study the row of buttons and... stuff. It was all really really confusing, and way out of my league. I really did wish I'd brought Serenity then, because it was probably right up her alley. But I hadn't, so I had to do it myself. Somehow. It would have helped if I could have found a damn access port though!

“Do you like it?”

I jumped back as the voice boomed. My head shot up and my eyes scanned looking for whatever just did that!

“What the hell!” Flare asked loudly, just as confused as I was.

“It is called a Crusader Maneframe.” The Voice paused before continuing. “It was supposed to be anyway, but my spies were unable to steal complete design documents, so we had to improvise. It is as close as you'll find south of equestria though.”

“Who are you!?” I thought it was someone from the Clips and Clops toying with us over the speaker system. They'd seen us with the cameras, and now were letting us know how screwed we were. I was wrong.

The giant monitor flicked on.

On it was the moving image of a slightly overweight brown stallion. He was balding slightly and his hair was a deep grey. It took me a few seconds, but I realized I had seen that pony before.

“I am the true ruler of Dise,” The stallion on the screen said with a knowing smile. “I am Walkkirk.”

Level Up!

Skill Note: Survival 75

New Perk: Rad Resistance: Your natural resistance to radiation and its effects is now 25% better than a normal pony of your same health and size. If such a pony existed.

((A/N: Hey there everyone! Turns out I am back! First I would think Kkat for creating the FoE universe and letting people like me muck around in it, and thank my editors Julep, Menti, and theBSDude for making this crap writeable. Also I wanted to apologize for the delay. I started university, and that among other things slowed down production. I can't promise the next chapters will come out faster (I will try though) but I will promise that I'm going to finish the story. I know some people were worried about Heroes becoming a dead fic, but that will not happen. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed, and I will try to get the next chapter out as soon as possible. ~No One~ ))

## Chapter 28: Hamartia

*“But history’s lessons, are snubbed and spurned. The day the world died, Nothing was learned.”*

This had to be a joke. A very elaborate joke Flare was pulling on me. There was no way I was talking to *the* Wallkirk. “You’re a computer,” I told the screen. “Just a computer.”

“And that,” the pony on the monitor said, “was my greatest failure.”

“We... we remember.” Platinum Haze eyed the monitor warily. “In Unity we remember a thought about a computer such as this; we remember it was said that it was so powerful one could upload an entire pony mind into one. But not the soul: other... methods were required for that.”

“Ah, an alicorn, and she speaks as an individual; how fascinating.” The pony on the monitor seemed amused. “I had heard the rumours of the death of your ‘Goddess’, but it is good to finally have confirmation.” The glare Platinum Haze gave him could have melted his screen. “But she speaks the truth, in regards to the upload... process. My mind, or rather the mind of Wallkirk is all here, but the soul...” He shook his head. “Which leads to a rather exorbitant amount of philosophical debate! Am I really Wallkirk, or just an AI pretending to be him? In the end, does it matter? I have his memories and his thoughts, so I am Wallkirk, for better, or for worse.” For worse.

“So... you don’t have a soul?” Souls were a concept I never really understood to begin with. Some sort of... intangible thing that made you, *you*. Like a spirit, or a ghost or something, by possessing your body. I think.

“Alas, no. I was supposed to, but you know: ‘the best laid plans of mice and mares oft go awry.’ This... computer was supposed to be my last resort, if and when the worst occurred. I went far out of my way, inserting spies into so many Ministries, into so much of Equestrian politics. It took years, decades, all to get a single agent a single minute with that damnable book.” He looked at Platinum Haze when he spoke, and I realized the reason I didn’t understand any of what he was saying was because he wasn’t speaking to me.

“The Black Book.” Platinum Haze’s mouth twisted into a grimace. “Mother sought it as well; it cost her her life when she was betrayed.”

“An interesting story; you must tell me some day, my dear.” Until then I didn’t realize a smile could look slimy, but his certainly did. “But yes, that book, the very same. It only took a minute for the words and spells to seep into his brain, or so I am told. He wasn’t... the same when he came back, but that didn’t matter. I didn’t need him sane, just alive, but there were... complications.”

“You’re very talkative, you know, for a mysterious ruler,” Flare said, flapping into the air. “Why tell us this at all? Boredom?” Flare flipped himself upside down and grinned at the screen. I think he was trying to show off.

“In time, pegasus, in time. Let an old stallion finish his tale first.” Flare raised an eyebrow (Well, he was upside down, so I guess he lowered it?) and Robo-Kirk continued. “I know you, well you two,” the pony on the screen pointed at me and Flare, “have been here.” The screen turned into a picture of a giant mountain, one I remembered right away. Those were not good memories. Wallkirk kept speaking, but he kept the picture on the screen. “Then you must have met... him.” He didn’t need to explain who “he” was. “And you probably met her as well.” I wasn’t sure who “her” was though.

“Yeah, your crazy... megaspell pony... thing. That didn’t work.” In my mind I could see Simple Heart standing there in the centre of the megaspell room, as if he had always belonged there. But also I remembered The Laughing Stallion and his eyes burning green. “Somepony made it work. Just thought you should. Um. Know.”

“I know, but that *thing* was not my doing. In the facility. Baptisia betrayed me. I wanted a weapon, a surprise attack. She wanted a pony who could travel through time at will, so we could see the future and know how to alter it, to avoid the unavoidable. In the end she created a monster who tormented us, one with unfathomable

power. We had to stop him, so my agent, the one with the knowledge granted by the black book, had to divide him up. Before he could try, we had to test the spell on something, to make sure it worked.”

The voice on the speakers. The one that controlled the robots and argued with Simple Heart. It couldn't have been... but I had to ask. To have the mystery be unravelled. “You attached her soul... to the security maneframe.”

The screen flickered away from the picture of the mountain, to a screen of Wallkirk's scowling face. I guess he didn't like me guessing his dramatic reveals. “Another mistake.” I was noticing a pattern. “Though a manageable one. And proof of concept, so there was something good to be had of it. My agent was able to cut apart the soul of that monster, to syphon off his power.” And his sanity. “Though he became... malleable after that, he enacted revenge on my agent... A week after he did his work, a day before he was supposed to move to Dise to be with me in case of the end, he committed suicide.” That day I had once again been witness to the power of Simple Heart, just a small portion of his power, acting on its own. Even that small thing could have been enough to cause somepony to commit suicide, I couldn't imagine what Simple Heart could do when lashing out in revenge.

Actually, I could imagine. The thought of Foundation rushed into my head, hanging from a rope, her face purpling. How close I came to the edge when Simple Heart taunted me with her. Yes, I could see how he got his revenge.

“And that, my friends. Is why I am a simple machine. I tried, but couldn't get another agent into the Ministry of Image to see the book, not in time.” Wallkirk finished his little story. “And that is why I am ‘just a computer’ as you put it.”

“I have to ask.” I took a step towards the computer screen. “Have you ever done anything right?” The image on the screen glared at me. “You built the tunnels. To protect Dise. But you failed. The radiation got through and killed everypony. You funded the mountain facility. And the megaspell project. But Simple Heart killed everypony in that facility. And the pony-megaspells... they weren't completed until after your death. You say you're the ruler of Dise. But even just since my arrival. There has been gang wars. Mega spells. General fear and discontent. Even yourself. You failed to preserve yourself like you planned. Everything you've done has ended in failure.”

To his credit Wallkirk didn't even flinch... or maybe that was more telling than if he had. “You're one to talk. I have been watching you; failure is one thing you are well acquainted with.” At least I admitted mine, tried to make amends. Whatever that was worth. “But we'll get to that. My failures... were... a fault in intelligence. The tunnels especially, I had not expected balefire...”

Flare decided to answer that, I think because it amused him to mock somepony supposedly so powerful. “Why not?” He was also still flying upside down. “It was common knowledge that the Minotaurs were allies of the zebras, so why wouldn't they share megaspell technology? What were you expecting?”

“The sun,” was Wallkirk's cryptic explanation for his utter incompetence.

“Celestia One,” Platinum Haze said almost immediately. The pony on the computer screen nodded to her, but I was completely baffled. “It's... a megaspell. The primary weapon of the equestrian army, it focused the sun's light. You believed you were going to be attacked by Equestria.”

“A limited megaspell exchange to force a surrender, followed by a prolonged occupation and annexation.” Wallkirk sounded like he was quoting something. “That was what our top war analysts thought Equestria was planning. However it was our belief that we would rebuff the annexation force resulting in a two front war for us and Equestria. We had planned for the war, set up secret bases...” The mountain facility was really far north, close to the Equestrian border, not the minotaur... and the weapons warehouse Marefort was built in: was that an Equestrian warehouse, or Caledonian? Did it matter? “No pony believed the zebras would attack with megaspells outright, but if Equestria was weakened by another war, our analysts gave a 67% chance that the zebras would launch a megaspell assault to overwhelm Equestria before they could respond, but it would end with mutually assured destruction. All signs pointed to a Caledonian/Equestrian conflict triggering an apocalyptic scenario: I built the tunnels under Dise to withstand Equestrian megaspells. It was for naught

though, as the zebras attacked before Equestria...”

So that.... Interesting. It made a lot of sense, it made things I had seen make sense, but it didn't mean anything. It was all just history. Still, I was curious. “Why were you so sure Equestria was planning an invasion?”

Robo-kirk looked almost insulted by the question. “They had already started. Poor governmental decisions allowed Steel Ranger battalions inside Caledonian borders, and there was a subtle creep of cultural and political pressure by Equestria. The writing was on the wall, one only needed to be able to read the words.” Okay, that Steel Ranger thing was certainly true... and there were other things. Maybe Baptisia was actually trying to prevent war with Equestria when trying to fuse Simple Heart with a time megaspell. Maybe... there were a lot of maybes.

“Okay...” I said. “But why tunnels then? How would it be different. If it were a sun megaspell. Not balefire.”

“Okay... that... takes some explaining,” Wallkirk smiled, “but I love to see curiosity. You see, megaspells have two effects. There's the initial blast of the spell going off, followed by a linger effect. The second lingering effect is closely tied in to what the spell was designed to do. For example during the war a healing megaspell was used, and to this day that area is known to produce the herbs that are used to create healing potions. It was believed that while Celestia One would obliterate the city in its initial firing, and possibly melt the first level of tunnels, everything below would be unharmed. It was also believed the after effect of the megaspell would create a massive heatwave that would last for ages...” The computer pony paused for a second before continuing. “It is said that Celestia One sank islands when it was fired, and the oceans boil to this day... It was believed that the lower sections of the tunnels would be cool enough to be survivable. Balefire radiation was never accounted for.”

“It should have been,” was the only reply I could think of.

“Ah, hindsight!” I didn't get it. “Regardless it was not. These you claim were mine were not. Why should I carry the burden of errors and betrayal? I did the best I could.”

“It wasn't enough.” My voice seethed. I don't know why I was angry, but something about his tone just made me want to break him.

“It never is. Still, the fruit of my labours are not all bad. Now the tunnels are the last refuge for a war stricken Dise.” Except that radiation was still sickening them and making them even more desperate. “Do you have any other questions?”

“Why,” Flare started to ask, “are you even letting us ask questions. Boredom?”

“Partially. But it is mostly to show I have no secrets and much knowledge.”

“We have a question,” Platinum Haze said. She still looked displeased about Wallkirk's ‘Goddess’ comment earlier. “You claim you are the ruler of Dise, but in what manner? From what we can see, nopony rules Dise; it is fought over by various gangs and factions.”

“There were only supposed to be four.” The screen flashed with pictures of each of the four casinos in succession. “Mustangs, Baises, Galicians, and The Hizai. But then the Enclave Remnants showed up to complicate things, and the Steel Rangers started to stretch their muscles. Soon the NCA came north to try and annex the city, and with them The Watchers.” Pictures of an Enclave vertibuck appeared on the screen, followed by a Steel Ranger in full armour, and then the NCA Flag: a phoenix with its wings spread in front of a five pointed star on a white field. “It has gotten more difficult. Originally, I set up a situation where the four gangs held competing power, none stronger than any other. I'd allow a gang to be overthrown by a new gang, but in situations where an existing gang would take over an existing one I would interfere to ensure the balance of power.” He appeared on the screen again and pointed at me. “You were involved in one such occasion. Where you warned me about the Baises' attempt to take over the Mustangs. I intervened with ponitrons to ensure that didn't happen.”

“Why?” was all I asked. Finally we were getting to something that actually was relevant to this century. Not that I could blame a computer made two hundred years ago for being stuck in the past.

“The populace would be divided. A united population is a danger, a united population starts rebellions and overthrows ruling power. United Dise would outnumber and destroy my ponitrons, perhaps create a new city, but without me to guide it; this New Dise would fall. If I only created two gangs then the population would turn to civil war, even worse. Four was the optimal number. It kept the populace divided enough never to think about overthrowing the ruler, because as far as they knew none existed, and avoided all out war because no one gang could hope to overtake the other three. It also meant my ponitrons would be able to be more effective in deciding battles with less opposition. Make no mistake, I rule Dise, but it is best for everypony if nopony knows that I do. It has not always gone perfectly, before the system was in place, that clown Mr. House attempted a coup, and even now he is a constant thorn in my side.”

“You know I work for him, right?” Should he really be telling me all this, considering my affiliation. Of course, if he didn’t know, me telling him was probably not the smartest thing I had ever done.

“Of course I know, do you take me for an idiot?” The imagine on the screen didn’t look insulted, though the tone implied it. “I was getting to that part. Here’s the thing: I need you, Hired.”

“I’ve heard that before.” It seems I couldn’t talk to a single gang leader, king, or military general without them asking for a favour. Even Simple Heart asked for something, and he called himself a god.

“You’re loyal; I’ve seen it through my camera system and have heard many reports. What’s more, that you’ve found this place which proves you’re resourceful.”

“So? I already have a job.” And he already said I was loyal, what was he playing at.

“Hear me out at least.” I nodded to the... screen. I wasn’t really sure where his cameras were so I guess that’d have to do. “I’m not freely giving out the secrets of the past just to enlighten you, I’m showing you that I trust you, and that you should trust me. I have a problem: Do you remember Granny Dynamite?”

“Yes.” She was the leader of the Galicians... well, I thought she was. I guess she was really just a pawn of Walkkirk.

“She served me well, but she was old.” Even an idiot like me could notice the fact he was speaking in past tense. “She died a few days ago, peacefully in her bed, which is a... problem.” That would be. Without a leader, ponies might find out about him. “So I need a replacement.”

“So... your genius plan,” Flare said, still upside down, “is to try and recruit somepony who has a job, and you already described as ‘loyal’? Suddenly the destruction of Dise makes so much more sense with you in charge. The Galicians have employees, why aren’t you asking one of them?”

“Because they’re loyal to money, not to the contract, and there is a difference. And unfortunately, with Mr. House’s new contract with the NCR, that old fool can outspend me.”

“That leads to more questions,” I replied. “If you know he can out-pay you, why you’d tell me that, and why you’d think I’d break a contract.”

“As it turns out,” the pony on the screen had a smug smile on his face, “the answer to both those questions are the same. I can offer you something he cannot, something that is more important to you than any of my current employees. Security.” I blinked. He was going to need to explain. “Mr. House has you out fighting raider gangs, scouring irradiated tunnels, and nearly getting killed in megaspell explosions, whereas all I ask from you is to give my orders. I know about your filly too, and I know each job you get you’re forced to bring her with you, or leave her alone, neither of which are options you like. But with me, nothing, no danger. You can live your life with her free of danger and fear. Free from the harshness of the wastes, with your only task being repeating my orders. You’ll live to be as old as Granny Dynamite, and when you die, long from now, peacefully of old age, your daughter will have the option to take on your position.”

That was... tempting. So very very tempting. It was what I wanted, wasn’t it? To be free of the pain and the fighting and settle down in peace. Serenity would be upset that she couldn’t learn cybernetics from Mr. House... but the trade off.

“No.” I surprised myself with my answer. “Not yet.” But it was the right answer. Security was nice, but it was not something he could promise. Radiation blanketed the city, and the culprit... culprits were still at large, and

would strike again. How could I take an offer of peace if I knew that it wouldn't last. No... I wanted to take his offer but I couldn't. Not until I ripped out Dragonslayer's heart and found out who was behind the madness engulfing the city. Maybe after... "It's too dangerous. You know it. You said so yourself. Things are falling apart. It wouldn't be security. Not until somepony stops it..."

"And that pony will be you?" the computer intoned in a disappointed tone.

"Who else?" If the Batmare or Pinprick were still alive they would have been vastly more qualified to take this on, but they weren't. Only me. I was the only one who knew Dragonslayer was the key to everything, the only one with the information and ability to go after him.

"Silver here has a personal stake in the matter," Flare said finally turning right side up. "Revenge. If you knew her better, you'd know that when she wants revenge, she won't stop until she gets it. So yeah, I can see her stopping whoever set up the bomb."

"We are of the belief that Hired Gun's tenacity, strength, and endurance -- along with the knowledge she has gained from travelling across the Dise wasteland -- has made her uniquely prepared for this task." Platinum Haze added.

"I see... still, think on my offer. Keep what you learned here a secret, and think it over. I can hold off on replacing Granny for maybe two weeks, with everypony concerned about other matters, but if I do not get an answer within that time frame I will be forced to find a replacement. However, so long as you tell no pony what you learned, you can take up my offer any time within those two weeks."

"I... okay..." There was no point burning bridges, and who knows. Maybe if I sped up my adventuring time all this would be over in a couple weeks... it wasn't likely, but it was too good an opportunity not to try. "I'm sure Flare and Haze will not tell anypony either."

"Who would we tell?" Platinum Haze asked.

"My lips are sealed, don't worry; I don't like you when you're angry."

"If that is all," the screen said, "I'll have my ponitrons escort you to the surface."

"Wait. One more question." Wallkirk raised an eyebrow at me when I asked, but he didn't stop me so I continued. "You seem to know a lot, so tell me. Who do you think caused the megaspell explosion?"

"Heh, you don't know?" I had my theories. "All one needs to do is look at the evidence. For a long time the NCA council has been on the verge of war with the minotaurs. Various city-states involved were pressuring the council to vote for war, with some holdouts determined to stymie the vote. What the council needed was a push, and what a push! With it the cities that wanted war got the one they wanted, and weakened Dise, the city they've been trying to annex for years, all in a single explosion. After that, the answer is obvious."

"You think it's a false flag operation?" Flare asked. "That a group within the NCA set it, and the Batmare, up to make it seem like an attack, but with the only ponies getting hurt are actually in the city?"

"How could it be anything else?"

I didn't believe that, not even for a second, but it was... well, it was an idea. There were so many options, so many possible ponies. So many factions. This task I set for myself seemed more impossible by the day.

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I'd only been in the Galician casino once before, way back when I was a newcomer to the city, but it looked the same as I remembered, and how could I forget. It had an arched ceiling decked out with streamers, ribbons, balloons, and an excessive amount of pink. All of the card tables and slot machines looked like candies, and it was all unbearably sweet. I felt sick just walking through empty casino floor.

I guess that was different. It was completely empty. I know Flare talked about Mr. House selling those spell-in-boxes that can eat radiation, but had Wallkirk even bought any? Given his apparent dislike for Mr. House, it seemed unlikely, which added a new element to the question of why he didn't have an employee take Granny's position: there were none left. It was just my suspicion though, but the ticking of my pipbuck as we

walked through the building helped to confirm that.

“We are confused,” Platinum Haze said, breaking the silence. (Well, it wasn’t completely silent between the hoof steps, my pipbuck ticking, and the whirring ponitrons made, but close enough to be awkward. “Why would this casino be the home of Wallkirk?”

“What?” I asked, because I didn’t understand. Where else would he work?

“Wallkirk spoke of a cultural annexation by Equestria, but this entire city was partially funded by the Equestrian Ministry Of Morale, and this hotel in particular was designed in part by its head Pinkie Pie.” That was information I didn’t know. What kind of name is Pinkie Pie? “To wit, the pony head at the apex of the hotel is in the likeness of Pinkie.” It was good to finally put a name to that creepy face. “If he was so worried about cultural corruption, why would he spearhead it?”

“Plausible deniability?” Flare suggested. Before I could even ask what that meant Flare explained. “If what we learned is right, he spied on and stole heavily from the Equestrian government and Equestrian companies. So if it was ever noticed, he would be an unlikely suspect due to his work with the MoM.” But wouldn’t that shift the blame over to the Caledonian government and be worse? If it worked at all, because they could still prove it was him. “Or maybe he just really wanted to build a city in honour of his giant dick, and had to stick it in a few unsavoury holes to get it done.”

“That,” Platinum Haze said slowly, “is not quite how we would have put that, but we cannot deny both those options are plausible. Perhaps if we meet Mr. Wallkirk again we will query him.”

Assuming we survived long enough to ask, I was curious too. Not that the politics of two hundred years ago really mattered, but I couldn’t help my curiosity. There was a time when I wouldn’t have cared at all, but it seemed that the more I learned about the past, the more I wanted to know.

We reached the exit to the casino and the ponitrons that had been shadowing us suddenly stopped and turned away. I guessed that was as far as they were going to go. I wasn’t sure why though, it wasn’t as if outside was dangerous to robots as the city was completely dead. Still the robots whirred away, so Wallkirk must have had some reason, probably just to hold back his strength in case something happened.

The doors swung open and the four of us walked out into the dead city.

Only, it wasn’t dead. In the distance the sound of magical energy weapons filled the air, making the streets buzz. At first we looked around, unable to figure out where the shots were coming from. They weren’t close enough to be a direct threat, but if there was a fight it could escalate. Flare saw it first.

“Shit!” I looked over to Flare, his helmet staring into the sky. I followed his gaze to the raptor that was still hovering over the Enclave base.

Highlighted by the setting sun, black blurs zipped around looking like bugs around the nest. Only these bugs were firing green blasts of energy at each other. There had to have been a dozen pegasi fighting around the raptor that I could see, but I couldn’t tell who was fighting who, it was just a mess of black and green bathed in golden light.

“Shit,” Flare said again flapping his wings. “I know you have stuff to do, but they’re my people.” Flare looked down at me. “I have to figure out what’s going on.”

“I know.” I turned my gaze from the fighting to him. “Figure out what’s going on. Stop it.” There was enough wrong in Dise, we didn’t need an Enclave civil war in the middle of it.

“Right. I knew we shouldn’t have brought in those enclave deserters, fuck.” He looked up at the fighting then back at me. “I might need to call in a favour, but not yet. Need to see what’s happening; just... be ready.”

I figured he saved my life enough for that to be fair. “Just go, and try not to die!”

“Haven’t died yet; don’t worry your tiny brain,” Flare said as he flew off towards the fight. Hopefully, if he was smart, he avoid the actual fighting and just find out why they were fighting... but this was Flare.

“Lets go,” I said to Platinum Haze as I started to gallop towards the BS. Luckily it was just across the street,

because I wanted to get there as fast as possible so I could be ready to help Flare out if he needed it.

I reached the door to the BS within the minute and started to knock.

There was no answer.

I knocked hard.

Still no pony answered.

“This better be a fucking joke.” I growled between my teeth. Platinum Haze looked down at me concerned but I didn’t care. “HEY!” I yelled at the door. “LET ME IN!”

“We are certain they will; just be patient, Silver.” Yeah, no. I was anything but patient.

There was an echoing thud as I kicked the door so hard I dented it. “I SAID-”

“I’m sorry!” A voice replied through the door in a breathless tone. “We’re... there’s been an emergency, no pony is allow-”

“I am a fucking Hizai. Designation Starmare. Open the door right *now!*” Normally I wouldn’t have been so pissed, but between the radiation flooding into me, whatever was happening with the pegasi and Flare, and the fact it had been far too long since I’d any Med-X, I was not in the mood to wait.

I could hear the barest sound of murmuring on the other side for nearly a minute before the door creaked open. “Haze, meet me in the room.”

“We shall await you there then.” Her horn shimmered and my shoulder burned as she turned invisible.

I slipped inside when I realized the door wasn’t going to open any more. It was a tight fit, but I got inside and as soon as I did the guard ponies slammed the door behind me. “What was the meaning...” I started to yell at the guard, but my voice slowed as I realized that while I recognized the two guards, Tight Lips was missing. “Of this... Where is Tight Lips?” They mentioned something about an emergency right?

“Oh... M-miss Hired,” the stallion stuttered as my eyes turned away from him looking across the casino floor. There were more guards than before, and most seemed to be questioning residents of the shanty town. “T-there was a... incident. You... uh... I’m not sure how to put it... um...” the guard nervously stammered.

“What?” I turned towards him again. He was sweating so much that his mane was slick and matted to his forehead. “What’s going on?”

“I-i-it’s.” The stallion looked like he was ready to flee at a moments notice.

“It’s what!”

“Your daughter.” The stallion took a deep breath as my eyes widened. “She was taken.”

---

Pearly wasn’t in her tent. Perhaps it was for the best; I don’t know what I would have done if she was. I think I heard the guard pony follow me when I ran off, but maybe I was wrong. It was hard to hear over the pounding in my head. It was like somepony was beating a drum on my skull, and it was all I could hear. My eyes burned and blurred as I tore apart the tent looking for something, anything. The only thing I found was a orange toy that was modified with metal limbs left in the middle of the room.

“Scootaborg.” My voice sounded raspy as I picked the toy up. “Fuck.”

I stared at the toy. Tears dropped from my eyes and fell on it, wetting the figure’s mane and I couldn’t think of words. How could this happen again. I was being careful. I thought I was being careful. If this ended up like Foundation-

No. I couldn’t think of that. Anything but that.

I squeezed my eyes tight and sniffled. After tearing my eyepatch off I wiped my eyes with my good hoof. Apparently a cybernetic eye could still cry.

There had to be a way. I couldn't... I couldn't let the memories of Foundation, the possibilities of what might happen stop me. When I found Serenity I would kill whoever took her from me, and when I was done nopony would dare take her from me again. But how... how could I...

"Ma'am?" a voice said from the door of the tent. "Are you... I mean, uh," the stallion stuttered.

"What." My voice was dry, but I'd stopped crying. I must have looked a mess when I turned to him, given the way he recoiled. He eyed the toy I was still carrying and sighed.

"I-i'm sorry. It was... Tight Lips... she..." He took a deep breath to compose himself. "She was a spy, apparently. We didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. We t-tried to follow her when w-we realized but she escaped on a vertibuck." The Enclave... it had to be related to the fight outside. Maybe Flare had already blown up Tight Lips and gotten her back for me... maybe.

"Where..." It was hard to speak. Fuck. I just wanted to kill something, but I could barely tell who was my enemy any more. When did everything become so muddled.

"I... we don't know... I'm sorry. We're... looking into it. M-mister House. He wants to... speak with you." He looked around nervously. "But, your friend. The unicorn here, she... she's in the infirmary, injured but awake... I can, um..." He chewed on his lip a little bit. "You... probably want to talk to her, right?" I nodded slowly, the pounding in my head making it hard to think properly. "I can... uh, bring you there. Mr. House wanted to see you right away... but, um..."

"Thanks." I said after a long pause. "Just... give me a minute." The stallion disappeared behind the curtain leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I didn't want to be alone for long, so I only stayed long enough to put Scootaborg into my pack and make sure I left nothing important behind. When I was certain that nothing else of Serenity's was in the room I took out a vial of Med-X and jammed it into a vein. The drug did little but dull the pounding in my head, but it was enough for the time being.

When I left Pearly's tent, the guard stallion whose name I'd not yet learned led me through the casino. A few of the residents gave me sad pitying looks, but all of them averted their gaze when I looked at them. Nopony talked when I walked by though, so it was mostly quiet. The guard stallion did not talk either, he simply led me to some stairs to the medical wing, and then to a crowded white room.

Beds lined the walls with barely enough space for each patient. A few ponies were lucky enough to have curtains around them but most did not. Clearly this room was not designed to hold so many ponies and I was a bit surprised that so many were even here. I didn't think Mr. House would keep injured; at least not so many. "After the bombs went off and the riots started many ponies were hurt. All these are recovering," the stallion explained.

"Serenity... she had her own room..." I said remembering back.

"Yes, she's a daughter of a Hizai, and got special treatment." Of course she did, but not special enough to protect her it seemed. "Your friend, down this way." He walked to the end of the room.

Pearly was turned away from us, and I could see where part of her mane was shaved away and her scalp was stitched up. It looked... bad. The cut had to be almost eight centimetres long, and deep. She must have lost a lot of blood. Pearly didn't turn when we walked up. I don't think she noticed.

"I'll uh... leave you two..." The stallion looked intently at the floor. "Remember, when you're done. Mr. House."

"Yes." I said sternly enough for the stallion to quickly back off. I walked closer to the white unicorn trying to contain myself. Make no mistake, I was furious with Pearly for letting Serenity go, but I knew it wasn't her fault, so I tried my best to contain myself. "Pearly." I said a little bit louder when I got close.

"Silver..." She turned over in the bed. Her eyes were bloodshot, and there was still some dried blood on her face that hadn't been cleaned off yet. "I'm... so sorry."

"I..." I wanted to say I forgave her. She looked like such a mess it was hard not to feel sorry for her, but... I

couldn't. I couldn't forgive her, and I couldn't forgive myself. Not yet. "I know... just." I took a deep breath. "What happened?"

She started to sit up slowly. "We were... playin' a game. It... can't recall what it was, ain't important 'nuff ah guess... then. That guard, Tight Lips, she comes in happy-'s-y' please and asks how we're doin'. Said ya asked her ta... y'know, check on us. Ah was a little bit put out, thinkin' ya didn't trust me, but ah kept mah trap shut. Said we were fine." She reached behind her head to carefully poke at the stitches. "Next thing I know ah'm down, blood everywhere. Serenity's screaming and tries to use magic, but she puts this... thing on her horn, and... I tried ta get up, when that didn't work ah tried to magic mah shotgun but she put a thing on mah horn too. She leaned in real close-like and told me ta deliver a message."

"To me?"

"Just so." She nodded painfully. "She said t'tell ya ta go to your old room, she said... she said it'd be clear then. Ah tried ta tell the guards but... it was hard, ya know." She sighed. "I'm... I'm sorry. Ah tried... Ah managed ta get the thing off, but... I couldn't give chase." She dug around under the blanket and pulled out what looked like a ring out. "Here, this is it." It was a silvery colour with a few small gems imbued into it. "Don't know what it is, but might help ya?"

"Thanks." I took the ring and stored it. Celestia knows how useful it would turn out to be, but I wasn't about to turn away a lead. "Pearly..."

"Don't... I know, yer mad; ah can't... blame ya. If ya never want t'speak t'me 'gain, ah'd understand, just..." She rubbed her eyes. "Ah tried; ah would never let anything happen ta Serenity if ah could help, but... ah couldn't. Fucked up, got hit and... y'know?"

"I know..." I lowered my eyes, it was hard to look her in the eyes. "Get better soon..." I turned and walked away. I couldn't stand to be there a second longer; it was just too much. It was as much my fault as hers, and if I could have walked away from myself, too, I would have.

---

"What took you so long?" Mr. House asked when he heard me open the door. I didn't bother to answer; I really wasn't in the mood. "I'm sorry about Tight Lips; I can assure you, I have ponies looking into what happened. For now though, I have a job for you, but I suppose I should hear what you uncovered." Was he joking?

"What job?" I'm not sure what he was trying to pull, but if he seriously thought I was going to be doing anything but rescuing Serenity...

"This business with the Enclave has me worried." He was staring out the window again, looking up at the raptor hanging above the city and the lights flashing around it. "You have an inside source with them, so I need you to infiltrate the conflict, see what's going on, and if necessary make sure whichever side is victorious is thankful for the help I provided."

Rage filled me, and it took all of my power not to kick his head in. How dare he try to keep me from rescuing Serenity. I gritted my teeth together and said as politely as I could manage: "No."

"What do you mean, no?" He didn't even bother to look back at me.

"I mean 'no.' I'm not doing the job. Not whi-" I tried to explain, but he cut me off.

"Yes, your daughter; I should have expected that reaction." He turned back to look me in the eyes. "While I can understand your concern, going gallivanting off Celestia-knows-where to rescue her won't do any good. Not only does my proposed job help me, but it would assist you." He turned back to his monitor and pressed a few buttons. "This was caught on the roof's security camera."

The monitor flickered to life and a picture of the roof of the BS appeared. It looked the same as I remembered it for a few brief seconds before I noticed some debris getting knocked loose and fluttering in a wind that wasn't there before. It was almost as soon as I noticed that, that a black brick of a vehicle descended into view. I remembered the vertibuck well, but I was shocked to see it there. If House was using

the video to convince me, it had to be related to Serenity's foalnapping, and possibly whatever was happening with the Enclave.

Sure enough it was only about a minute later that they came into view. Seeing Serenity tied up on Tight Lips' back brought back all the anger and sadness from before. It was hard to watch with my eyes blurring with tears, but I kept watching. I needed to remember it, and the faces of the ponies who helped. So that I could kill them later. I couldn't help but smile though, when Tight Lips tried to throw Serenity into the vertibuck only to be bitten for her efforts. It wasn't enough to free her though, and the video ended with the vertibuck flying off.

"The two events are related," Mr. House concluded, "and by doing this job, you'll be able to gain invaluable info into what happened to your daughter, so we can organize a rescue. As you can see, this is beneficial, even beyond your contractual obligation."

"No," I said for the third time. He still did not seem to understand. "I'm not doing your job. This information helps. But Serenity comes first. I don't have time to... play politics with the Enclave Remnants."

"This is not up for debate." He sounded... tired. Perhaps frustrated with my refusal to do his bidding. "It is your job. When you became a Hizai, you put your life in my hooves. To do what missions I tell you. So I'm telling you to do your damn job."

"I quit," He stared slack jawed at me for a good minute.

I didn't care. Ever since I came down into Dise, I tried to make my word as good as gold, to do my jobs as instructed, to never break contract. To some this made me loyal, to others I seemed like nothing more than a slave to my contracts, but to me I was simply being honest with myself. Never take a job you can't do, so I took the ones I could do, and I did them to the letter. Now though, now things were different. Honour and honesty didn't mean anything when compared to Serenity. I'd always assumed there would come a time when I would have to choose between my job and what was right, but I'd never imagined the choice would be so easy.

"Y-you what!" He was... angry. That was odd. I had never seen him so furious before, and I almost felt sorry for him. He was used to having control, but here he was powerless. "I need you! The city needs you! This is not the time for—where are you going?"

I turned around and walked out the door.

"I'm not done; you can't leave. I forbid it!"

I kicked the door shut behind me. The echoing thud of it slamming punctuating his last (incorrect) sentence.

There was a part of me that felt guilty over leaving him like that. Not because I wanted to do his stupid job and felt bad for not, as there was nothing that could have made me feel guilty for looking for my daughter. Instead, I felt guilty I didn't tell him the truth about Wallkirk. By all rights I should have told House the truth, and the falling out with Serenity didn't affect the results of a previous job, but I still couldn't tell him. I knew that by denying House I was burning a bridge, and I could afford to do the same with Wallkirk. So I kept the truth to myself, and prayed it would pay off in the end.

I didn't stay in the hallway for long, as I was legitimately worried he was going to call Security to deal with me, so I galloped quickly over to the elevator and stared at the panel. I needed to get out of the building as fast as possible, then find Flare and see if he knew...

"Shit." I punched one of the buttons on the panel and the elevator jerked downwards. In all the commotion I'd forgotten about Platinum Haze... I had to tell her what happened, she deserved to know...

Maybe telling her wasn't the best idea, I thought as the elevator moved agonizingly slow. She was close enough to Serenity and I, so she deserved to know, but... she would want to go with me, to help me find her. That wasn't bad, but she was painfully pacifistic. If I tried to kill Tight Lips (and I would as soon as I saw her smug smile) she might try to stop me, make it a big moral dilemma and... and call me evil, but I didn't want that. I just wanted to kill that bitch, like she deserved and be done with it.

The elevator slowed to a stop at the floor my room was on. It was a long, slow walk as I agonized over my decision. In the end, it wasn't until I opened the door and saw Platinum Haze standing in my room with a sad look in her eyes that I decided.

"Serenity, she was..." I started, feeling the emotions welling up in my chest once more.

"I know." Her eyes were downcast. "We... if we had not gone with you, if we had stayed to protect her this would not have happened. We are sorry."

"What..." I took a step into the room, closing the door behind me. "How did you find out?"

Platinum Haze looked up at me, and floated a piece of paper in her magic. "This was left on your door. It... You will want to read it." She floated it over to me, keeping it at eye level in her magic.

*Dear Hired Gun,*

*You'll be happy to know that I survived our last encounter, despite your valiant efforts to the contrary. You're starting to become a thorn in my benefactors' side, so I encouraged them to deal with you. We don't have the time to deal with you in a similar manner to how we removed your Batty friend, so this is going to be rather straightforward. I apologize for the lack of subtlety on our part, but desperate times and what have you. To wit, we have your daughter. Now, while we could use her as blackmail material promising safety for compliance we both know that wouldn't work. Since you're too stupid to be reasonable, you'd come for her anyway, so we're going to cut out the middlepony. You're going to come for her, and you're going to do it with fire and lead and all those things you love so much. So come for her, she is safe and sound, and will remain so until you get here. Ah! But you must be wondering where 'here' is, though I suppose it's somewhat inaccurate, as at of the time of writing I am not 'here' yet, nor is your daughter, but it sounds more dramatic, no? As for the answer to the question, it is where it all began (or, if we're feeling artistic, where the ending began). I'll give you a few minutes to figure it out; the answer is on the back. I hope to see you there soon.*

*Your Dear Friend,*

*Dragonslayer*

I didn't bother trying to figure out his stupid fucking riddle. I ripped the page from Platinum Haze's magical grasp and turned it over.

*South Canyon*

That... It took me a second, but when I realized what it was talking about it made so much sense. It seemed so long ago when I first entered Dise and worked for the Mustangs, but during that time I remember hearing on the radio about an attack on a base apparently located in the originally named *South Canyon*. What more, it was a megaspell attack. It was a while ago, but I remember there was talk about the NCA and Minotaurs going to war over it, but it never happened because there was no proof it was the minotaurs...

Then, weeks later, there was a megaspell attack on the NCA that could be loosely tied to the minotaurs. Whatever Dragonslayer was trying to do with the attack on the train station, it wasn't the first time he'd tried it... It didn't explain what he was trying to do, but it did make certain groups unlikely to have been involved. Wallkirk's belief that it was a false flag operation was nigh impossible considering how many lives were lost in the South Canyon attack. What concerned me more, though, was that the group I suspected as the culprit (The Steel Rangers, as previously stated) were far away at that time.

Either that or Dragonslayer had nothing to do with it and was just trying to fuck with me. It was entirely possible that Serenity wasn't even taken there... but I was going to go anyway. It was the only lead I had.

Below the word, however, was another message.

*PS: My benefactors were worried when the NCA intercepted messages between us and our spy within Mr. House's operations. A spy even informed us of an NCA Major giving you private information to deliver to Mr. House, but it was lucky for us it wasn't relevant. Perhaps you should think twice before trusting the NCA again.*

Private information I was suppose to... give... shit.

“Hired? May we inquire as to what you are doing.” I heard Platinum Haze say as I tore off my saddlebags and started digging through the pockets. “Hired?”

Eventually I found it. It was hidden deep in the bottom of my saddlebags, slightly ripped and crumpled from misuse. Lucky told me to deliver this to Mr. House but I... forgot. Was Dragonslayer just playing more mind games, or did I really have information that could have stopped all this, but just forgot.

I opened the envelope as fast as I could and tore the letter out from it and read aloud with a wavering voice: *“An intelligence asset of ours managed to retrieve an encrypted message that was to be delivered to a pony named ‘Dragonslayer’. We haven’t been able to crack the code, but we were able to confirm it came from your security chief. It is in our mutual interest that you handle this situation as quickly and quietly as possible. As usual, you did not get this information from us.”*

“Silver...” Platinum Haze said after a moment of silence, “it is not possible for you to have known what the message said; the foal-napping of Serenity was beyond your ability to control. If Tight Lips had been found out by House prior, they would have used somepony else.” Haze was wrong of course—it was my fault—, but I appreciated the attempt. It was my fault, so it was my job to fix it.

“I know,” I lied. “We need to go. Now. We know where they took her; we need to...”

“What if he’s lying?” Platinum Haze’s words almost broke my resolve. “It is within the realm of possibility for him to tell you one location, only to head to another; even if he is telling the truth it could be a trap.”

“Could?” I looked Platinum Haze in the eyes and hardened my gaze. “It *is* a trap, one he knows I’m going to spring, that’s why he is going to be there. He is going to try to kill me. I plan to spring his trap, survive, and kill him back.” Platinum Haze started to talk, but I cut her off. “I know, you won’t help me kill him; I won’t ask you to. But... if you want to come, you have to promise me. Promise me that you won’t stop me.”

“Silver we canno-”

“Haze,” I had to cut her off again, “you have to promise me.”

“We...” she looked conflicted, but eventually conceded. “We promise you, but please, put Serenity’s safety ahead of your desire for revenge.”

“Always.” I turned to leave the room when I heard a sudden sharp knock on the windows.

I turned to see if it was just Haze leaving the way she usually did, but instead I saw the shape of a pony on the other side. Haze started to open the window with her magic so I ran over to it, just in case whoever it was wasn’t friendly.

“Open it faster next time!” Flare said through his mask. As he continued to talk I noticed his armour was smoking and marked with scars, but it seemed like he wasn’t hurt. “There’s a coup going on in the raptor! Fucking unbelievable! And Serenity, she was kidnapped by—”

“We know,” I replied, cutting him off. “What’s a coup?”

“Nothing good.” Flare looked behind him. “Shit, they’re coming. We need to get out of the city now. Hired, I know this will be hard for you, but you need to mount Haze—” was this really the time for jokes? “—and follow me.”

Before I could object to the plan, I was lifted up in Haze’s magic. “We are sorry, but we must hurry. Hold on tight and close your eyes,” Haze said as she dropped me onto her back. She didn’t need to tell me twice as my legs were already wrapped around her neck and back and my eye closed tight by the time she sped through the window. As was often the case, though, my curiosity overpowered my good sense and I peeked my eye open.

We were flying towards a vertibuck’s open door, but since it was speeding above Dise’s main street we were flying at an angle to catch up to it. When I looked to see what the rush was I saw, two more vertibucks giving chase, with a few Enclave personal supporting them. Three of the enclave ponies seemed to break off from the chase and aimed for us. “Haze!” I tried to warn my ride.

“We are aware,” she replied, still flying to intercept the Vertibuck Flare was heading towards.

The enclave ponies were taking aim. “Haze!” I said again louder.

“We already stated: we are aware!”

She didn’t seem aware as the Enclave ponies were getting really close, and I swear I could see their weapons charge up. “HAZE!” Haze’s horn glowed and a shield formed around us just in time to catch the energy blasts and make them fizzle out. “Finally!”

“We were completely aware of the situation.”

“You didn’t seem aware.” I replied as more MEW bolts danced on Haze’s shield.

“Regardless of what may have appeared, we had the situation under control.” Haze said as we closed the gap to the vertibuck Flare was leading us towards.

“The bickering is cute, but get inside.” Flare was suddenly beside us and pointing at the vertibuck’s open door.

Haze banked hard left and stepped inside. I barely had time to get off Haze and get my bearings before the machine accelerated so quickly I fell on my rump. My eyes traced the room and I noticed an elderly pegasus in the room with us, though I was more concerned about the open door. That couldn’t be safe. “Who are you?” I asked the pegasus who seemed confused to have been asked that question.

“I am High General Steel Wing.” High General? Maybe taking dash was a big problem in the enclave. “You must be Miss Gun.”

“Yeah... how did you know that?” I asked as I tried to get back to my feet. “Do you know what the fuck is going on?”

The General gave me a dirty look and was about to respond when Flare rushed into the cabin. “I’m so sorry about her, sir! She doesn’t know any better.” He kicked me in one of my remaining shins. “Nobody has instructed her how to talk to her betters, sir.” My betters? That old pegasus?

“You two are similar in that respect, Special Operative Flare.” I was just getting more confused. Last I checked Flare’s rank was Captain, or something. “It is no matter; I cannot expect deference from wastelanders.” He turned his gaze back to me, and with Flare standing beside me I realized that despite what was going on he wasn’t even wearing armour. “I do indeed know what is going on, but we can’t talk now, I’ll explain later. SO,” that seemed to be directed at Flare, “close that door before one of our guests falls out.” Flare nodded and turned towards the door.

There was a bang. A flash. Everything went white.

All I could hear was a high pitched ringing sounds. I tried to stand up, to move towards the door, but I tripped. I hit the ground, I think, and felt something brush against me. I wasn’t sure what. It felt like armour. I thought I felt a flap of wings, but with the air from the open door blowing I couldn’t tell. If only I could see... see.

I ripped my eyepatch off, and my cybereye solved that problem. Half my vision was still a mess, and I couldn’t hear, but I could see enough to notice two sets of enclave armour. Flare was fumbling with the door with a hoof over his eye plate, but another was heading towards the equally confused general. I tried to yell at Haze to help, but whatever hit us hit her too. Whatever was going on, I knew that Steel Wing needed to be safe.

I scrambled to my hooves and charged the stranger. My back hooves slammed hard into his side when I turned and bucked him, and the intruder stumbled but didn’t fall. I moved closer and bucked again, but I didn’t connect. Before I could put my hooves back on the ground I was suddenly turned upside down.

The enclave soldier had grabbed my legs, I realized in a panic, and he was flying. It didn’t take a genius to realize what direction he was flying, and before I knew it I was hanging upside down high above the city. Before I had the chance to react my stomach lurched and I was falling.

By more luck than skill, I managed I catch myself on the edge of the vertibuck with my cyberleg. So I was alive, but still dangling above the city. Dangling from things seemed to be a new habit of mine.

As I struggled to pull myself up and, the enclave pony was back. They ignored me though, and just flew through the door to get back at Steel Wing. Thankfully I'd delayed the pony long enough for the flash bang to wear off, and Flare's eyes seemed to clear just in time to grab me and help me up. The other enclave pony was getting closer to Steel Wing, so I didn't have time to thank him. I just scrambled back up with Flare's help and jumped at the intruder.

The idea didn't even hit me until I was in the air, but it was so good I had to do it. I managed to force the blade in my leg to slid out, and I stabbed it into the enclave pony's hind leg. The force of my blow was enough to drive the blade through the armour, if just barely. His screech was so loud it pierced the ringing from before. When I dropped back to the floor I dragged the screaming enclave pony with me.

"HIRED, WE REQUEST YOU MOVE!" As fast as I could manage I removed the blade from the ponies neck and rolled out of the way. It was just in time too, because Haze hit the enclave pony with a blast of energy with sent him flying out of the vertibuck in a wild spin. I gave her a confused look and was about to ask her what that was about but she answered before I could. "That attack was non-lethal. We are opposed to killing, not self-defence." Right, I knew that.

It seemed everypony was getting their senses back because the general was yelling, too. "SO, forget the door; just get them off us."

"Yessir!" And Flare was out the door. A few seconds later there was an echoing explosion that shook the cabin and forced me to take a seat.

Before anything else had the chance to try and kill us, I looked over at Haze and asked: "Are you okay?"

"We have a slight headache, and our ears are still ringing, but we are by and large healthy. Thank you for your concern." The yellow eyes scanned me and stopped at my hooves. "We... think it would be wise to put your blade away."

"What?" I looked down to see my sword was still sticking out of my leg. "Oh, right." First I wiped off the blood on my barding then retracted the blade with my mind. It was really weird, just thinking about the blade and having it slam back into my leg, but it worked so I wasn't complaining. "Forgot about that." I looked over past Haze towards the open door and the sky streaming past way too fast. We must have been well over Parasite Mound by then.

Before I could say anything else the nose of another vertibuck came into view through the still open door.

"Uh, General?" I looked back at him as the other vertibuck started to get closer. "Shouldn't you, get somepony to shoot that?"

"High General," he corrected. "And this is a troop transport; its not very well armed, and the only guns it does have are forward-facing." Which was really helpful. "That's an AMR on your back, is it not? This seems like a good job for you."

Before I could reply the door was covered in the black carapace of the other vertibuck as it slammed into us with a thunderous crunch. The room shook around me and Haze had to steady me with her magic as the two vertibucks parted from the grind flying further apart. "Well, shoot!" the general shouted.

You know, I'd always just used Subtlety as a large sniper rifle or a giant saddlegun; it was weird to have to use it for what it was actually made for. I climbed out of the seat and faced the open door. The Vertibuck that had slammed into us was still shaking but looked like it was starting to move in for another ram. My scope was useless at such close range, so I had to eyeball it, which wasn't risky at all. I did what I could to aim for the portion of the vertibuck that held the pegasi that actually powered the machine and opened fire.

The cabin echoed the roar of Subtlety to an almost deafening degree until I ran out of bullets. By then, though, the vertibuck was listing heavily. I must have killed something. My battle-saddles reloaded Subtlety and I put another round into the machine.

That did it. It started to fall out of view, and a few seconds later I swear I could hear it crash in the distance.

“Impressive shooting,” the High General said behind me.

I was about to reply to him when Flare came flying through the door and *finally* closed the door behind him. I swear that was really dangerous. “The rest of them are backing off, I think we’re in the clear...” he looked past me to the General. “Uh, I mean. All clear, sir.”

“Well done, SO. Come, sit; we have plenty to talk about.”

---

In all the fighting before I hadn’t gotten good look at High General Steel Wing. He was a dark grey ageing pegasus with a short cropped silvery white mane. I wasn’t the best at guessing ages, but if I had to, I’d put him at over fifty, maybe even sixty, though by the way he sat straight and stared with his hard, unblinking eyes it was clear if he was that old, he didn’t want it to show.

“So...” I started to say when things got really quiet and awkward, “what is going on? And I thought Flare’s rank was Captain.”

Steel Wing looked long and hard at me before leaning to look around me at Flare. “Have you not told her?” Flare didn’t say anything, but he must have shook his head or something because the General kept talking. “When I found out Flare was spying for Sky Fall I made him an offer. Instead of spying for him, he’d spy on him for me. It came with a pay raise, a special rank, and a promise he couldn’t be fired so long as he kept the rank.”

“Oh...” You’d think Flare would have told me about that...

Apparently Steel Wing could read my mind because he said: “It was highly classified, and he was instructed not to tell you.”

“We are confused,” Platinum said from the far side of the cabin. “You were his superior, why was it necessary for you to spy on him?”

“His rank gave him a high level of independence, and the structure of our organization made it difficult for me to watch him through conventional means. I knew he couldn’t be trusted, but I needed eyes on him. It turned out I was right, but while Flare was able to give me some information, Sky Fall was smart enough to keep much away from him.” I wondered if maybe Sky Fall knew he was being spied on, and fed only titbits of information to Flare to make the High General think it was working.

“So... then what happened? Did he attempt a takeover or...” It was related to Serenity somehow, that much I knew.

“No... I moved first, and he reacted. It was my fault; I miscalculated the depth of his support. The former Enclave personnel we acquired with the raptor sided with Sky Fall, when I had thought they would support me.” The aging general shook his head. “I moved to remove him from his position after I heard he had used one of our vertibucks to kidnap a foal. Your foal. I barely escaped the fight with my life, and those loyal to me have been forced to flee. We spread out to make chase less likely, and we have plans to rendezvous for a counter-offensive, as much as it pains us to fight against our brothers. But before that, I owe you.”

I stared at him for a minute, trying to think of what an aging general I’d never met before could possibly owe me. “What?”

“I should have known more. The kidnapping of your daughter took place on my watch, but I was impotent to help until it was too late. For that, my honour compels me to help you. I can fly you to any place in the greater Dise region, except for the city itself. This...” He paused and refused to meet my eyes when I looked at him. “This is hardly recompense, but it what I can offer you for now.”

“I need to get to the old NCA base in the south canyon.” I said without hesitation. If Serenity was there, I was going to be there too.

“That... I cannot do.” So much for anywhere. “It is a day’s flight, and I need to return to my men before then.

However, there is a river near the NCA farm that was used to ship supplies, I doubt they're still supplying food to a destroyed base, but there is no doubt a boat will take you there for the right price. I'll shall fly you to the port on the south side of the farm and provide you enough caps for transportation."

Before I even had the chance to reply Flare felt it necessary to interrupt me. "Sounds fair to me, oh, and also I'm going with them."

The general looked annoyed, but not surprised. At least that was my guess, but I never was the best at reading faces. "SO, we will need you. There are hard times ahead of us and, your moral lapses and judgement notwithstanding, you are an excellent soldier. "

"With all due respect, sir," Flare said, very clearly indicating his next words would be disrespectful or otherwise contradictory. "While I do love praise, and would never ask you to stop with that, Serenity is a friend of mine, Hired too, I guess. And... well... I need to help her in any way I can. I promise I'll return once she's safe... but I can't leave her hanging, not now."

The High General sighed. "I suppose I must let you, otherwise you'd just quit again." Again? Flare seemed to know what he was talking about as he nodded. "Fine, but please hurry; you will be needed."

"Fast as I can." Flare looked over at me, and I met his eyes. "You ready to go kick some ass?"

"Yeah... yeah." I tried to make myself sound confident, but thinking about what had happened had a way of dampening my spirit. Not that it was going to stop me. Put an enemy in front of me and I'd show them a mother's wrath, but sitting in that cabin with nothing to do but wait. It got to me.

"Now I need to ask you a question." I turned back to the general. "I know this is hard for you Miss... Gun... but it may be important for me to know why your daughter was taken."

"To get to me."

"Who are you?" That was a fair question.

"Nopony."

"You know," the general said, "you're not helping me make sense of the situation."

"I..." Why did everypony need me to talk? "I got too close to something. Something I shouldn't have. A pony named Dragonslayer. He hired the pegasi to help. I don't think they're that involved."

"Involved in what?" he asked in a sharp tone. I don't think he was used to ponies not giving direct answers.

"I... don't know." Truth be told, I wasn't sure if I could trust the High General. It seemed as if he didn't know anything about Dragonslayer, but... I just wasn't sure. I didn't want to get in anymore trouble. "Dragonslayer. He was hired by.. somepony..." If only I knew who. "The balefire bomb. That was part of it. I got too close. He thinks if I'm not taken out then... then I could ruin whatever his plans are."

"That... is still not very helpful."

I stared at the High General and said: "That's all I know." That was more or less the truth. I had my suspicions, but nothing I cared to tell the pegasi about. Maybe I wouldn't kill Dragonslayer when I found him. Maybe I would drive my sword into his shoulder and twist until he gave me some answers. And if he told me truthfully I'd let Subtlety kill him quickly. Even though he didn't deserve it.

"That will have to do," the High General said. "I suppose once you... confront him, you'll know more, and Flare can fill me in. If he was involved with the explosion, that is most troubling. So many on the surface blame us, you know." Oh, I knew.

"Can you blame them?" Apparently that was the wrong thing to ask because he responded with a glare so heated I thought I was going to melt. "I mean. The next day a giant airship shows up. And you all have those suits. That block radiation. And... let's be honest. Pegasi don't have the best... reputation."

"I know all about our reputation—," I half expected him to spit on me. "—but we aren't like the other Enclave, the cowards who stayed above. My father... he was there during the war with the griffins. The things he was ordered to do by the higher ups... nobody liked it. But it was the only world they knew, and it was

follow orders or join the slaughtered. Even still, my father and hundreds of others refused. Risked life and limb, leaving family behind for the sake of griffins they had never met. Those are the types of ponies that make up the Remnants. Ponies who gave up everything to be exiled by their homeland and mistrusted by the surface. So don't speak to me of 'reputation'. For having wings -- that we are guilty of, nothing else. Certainly not whatever madness this balefire bomb was." I think I hit a sore spot.

"I... uh. Sorry. I didn't mean... I just meant..."

"I know," he sighed. "I know. I can understand their mistrust, and the Enclave above with their little 'invasion' has only made matters worse. Now with Sky Fall and his coup, we're going to be mistrusted for years more, despite everything we have done." He looked up at me. "But once I take back control, we will continue to help the wasteland. As we always have, despite their mistrust."

"We can empathize with you," Platinum Haze said. "When we and our sisters attempted to enter the city peacefully, we were fired upon. Still, we are attempting to help the city as our order has requested, because we believe it is the correct course of action."

"Yes..." The general looked past me to Haze. "What is your order exactly?"

Haze seemed genuinely happy to be asked. "We are a member of the Followers Of The Apocalypse. We are a disciple of the teachings of Lady Fluttershy and Miss Velvet Remedy in an attempt to create a brighter future for the wasteland."

"I had heard stories of alicorns in the north... I didn't believe them, and stories were more... violent than you seem to be."

There was a hint of a blush on Platinum Haze's cheeks. "There were mistakes made when we were being controlled by our mother... we... would tell you the story, but we are afraid it would take far too long. Suffice it to say, not all alicorns are as the stories say, and many and more are confused without mother to guide us. Many have joined the Followers, but not all."

"One day, I will need to get the full story out of you. But it can wait. If I meet another alicorn, I will promise not to be hostile. As an act of solidarity."

Platinum Haze bowed her head. "We are thankful for that High General. Many judge us as monsters at a glance, perversions of the Goddesses. We are happy to hear we have changed at least one mind in this matter."

"When you say 'we'... do you mean yourself, or are you talking for all alicorns? One of the rumours said something about a mind link, and while I did not believe it then... well, it is better to look a fool while being cautious than die not asking the right questions."

Platinum Haze silently frowned for a second before answering. "We... were party of Unity... that mind-link these rumours spoke of. But that has been dissolved. Suffice it to say our manner of speech is an... after effect. Conditioning, perhaps. It is simply how we are used to speaking."

The conversation reminded me that I really should talk to Platinum Haze about what happened in that dream. I was not the best at serious discussions... or most discussions. But I owed it to her to see if I could help.

"I see," the High General said. With that the conversation faded away, leaving me with awkward silence (and the usual feeling of impending doom I got from flying) for the rest of the long flight.

---

I had never seen the inside of the massive walled-off farm the NCA ran to the east of Dise, and indeed still have never seen inside. It seems they were protective over their secrets and didn't like to have civilians looking around. Or Enclave personnel for that matter. When we first flew near, we were almost shot at and had to land outside the facility itself. Luckily the river dock was actually on the outside of the facility.

The General himself went out to handle the monetary arrangements leaving me, Flare, and Haze waiting in the vertibuck. The weight of the last twenty-four hours was still heavy on our minds so none of us talked. Instead we sat and listened to the slow ticking of my pipbuck, courtesy of the still-irradiated alicorn sitting

beside me. I hated the silence. In the chaos of the firefight, or the subtle confusion that came from the previous conversation, I could lose myself. But in silence, with nothing to distract me, all I could think of was what I lost, and how much more I stood to lose.

For all I knew Serenity could already be dead, slain by the Dragonslayer and used as a prop to lure me into a trap. Considering what I knew he was capable of, it wasn't that far fetched... but I couldn't think about that. I had to have hope. I had to fight to keep her safe, so I didn't allow myself those thoughts. But still, they came creeping into the back of my mind, reminding me how pointless it all was.

Before the darker thoughts could overwhelm me, the door slid open.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting." I looked over to see the General. "There were only a handful of ships on the dock, and only one was willing to head that far south. They say it'll be two days," far too long, "but they'll do what they can... I know it's not enough, but it's all I can do for now. Once things have settled down I'll have Flare send for you, and I'll pay you back in full."

"Thank you," I said as I left the cabin after Platinum and Flare, "for all your help."

"It's the least I can do." He waved a hoof behind him. When I looked over his shoulder I saw a row of boats floating lazily on the river next to wooden walkways built over the water. A dock, I guess it's called. "Your boat is the last one on the right, they're expecting you."

I nodded my thanks once more before heading off in the direction indicated with my companions in tow. It was still eerily quiet until Flare took off his helmet. Underneath he looked really sweaty and his mane was matted to his head. "Finally, no radiation." Except for Platinum Haze, but he was far enough away it must not have registered. "It's so stuffy in here, I can't wait to get out of it. No offence to you two, but I'm going to hit the sack as soon as we get aboard." I couldn't blame him for wanting sleep, I was exhausted, too. Though I wasn't sure I would be able to get to sleep. I knew I would have to during the two day trip, but the prospect did not endear me.

"We too require sleep at some future point," Haze replied. "We feel we must be properly rested if we are to deliver Serenity from harm."

The talk of Serenity dampened the mood, and not a soul spoke until we finally got to the boat.

"Well, would'ya look who dropped by." The captain said as I started to walk onto his boat. It took me a second to realize I knew him. The last time we took a boat, it seemed so long ago, he was there. Red Sky, that was his name. "You've got a smart head t'get away from the city, way I hear it. Nothing but nastiness on the radio; whole place has gone ta shit, and what did I tell ya. The faction shit was only going to implode in on itself. Well, come aboard; we're two days downriver without stopping, and I hear you're in a rush." I made my way onto the boat, followed by Flare and Haze. Red Sky eyed Platinum Haze as she came aboard, but didn't ask any questions. I figured the General had told him about her.

I still remembered the way to the cabin, so I made my way quietly there, but when I went to open the door I found myself face to face with a pitch black pony with a pink mane. Her... I knew her too. Streamwind. "Oh, well lookie who it is. Been a long time, Miss Gun, come back for more a'my fire bullets?" Images of Post Haste flashed through my mind.

"No!" I said too loudly. The last thing I needed to think of was burning foals. "No."

"Are, are you okay?" She looked around me. "Say, where's that darling filly I gave that toy to? I hope nothing happened to her..."

It was too much. I pushed past the mare and to where my room was last. She shouted something at me as I stormed past but I couldn't hear it. I slammed the door behind me when I entered my room, and I was alone. Alone with nothing but the darkness.

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The darkness held no answers for me and no sleep either. I heard whispering outside my door after my little scene, but even after it stopped I couldn't sleep. I felt the boat jerk and start to move down the river, but I still

couldn't sleep. Hours later as I listened to the river and creaking boards, I still could not sleep. All I could do was think, and thinking just brought sadness. I knew I was going to save Serenity, but the goal seemed so perilously far away. And with no enemy to kick, my rage just brought restlessness.

I held Scootaborg above me as I laid on my back, and just stared at it. I knew Serenity loved her toy, and I remembered that she always seemed to tinker with it when she was troubled. All I could think of was how scared she must be, and how the one thing that could have helped her was in my hoof. I let the toy fall from my hoof and bounce to the floor.

I needed air.

Maybe I could look up at Luna and ask for guidance. Maybe she would listen. So I rolled off of the bed, stepped over the fallen toy, and moved towards the door.

I cracked open my door and stuck my head out slowly to make sure nopony else was up. For some reason I wanted to be alone. I crept along the ship to reach the back deck like I had so long ago. Only, I didn't find it empty. Instead I saw Platinum Haze sitting there, glowing faintly in the moonlight as she looked up to the sky.

"Haze..." I said quietly as I moved towards her, but she didn't look over at me. I think she knew I was there though, because she still didn't react when I sat down beside and looked up at the moon with her.

"Luna was beautiful." Platinum Haze said eventually.

"You know what she looked like?" I asked in wonder.

"Yes... in a sense. Memories, vague images, remnants of Unity linger still. She was a beautiful pony, but also powerful and dark. It was no wonder Celestia abdicated to let her sister sit the throne; Luna was a pony built to fight a war." I wasn't exactly sure what that meant so I nodded in silence.

Eventually I asked: "Do you often have those, er. Memories. Of other ponies. I remember, in your dream... things kept..."

"Yes, they are always there. We have learned to separate those that do not belong to me, but at first it was very confusing. It is only remnants though, ghosts. For our mother... we are not certain how she managed... Perhaps she did not. Diamond Sky once proposed to me that perhaps she did not manage. That the minds became too much, and that is why she grew more unstable. We... do not like this theory..." She still did not look at me.

"You like your mother very much." It seemed strange, of course she liked her mother.

"She saved us from ourself. She lifted us up, gave us hope and purpose worth living for." She closed her eyes and let out a sad sigh. "Before we came unto our mother, we had seen much, and done much. You saw the visions, did you not?"

"Yes," I said softly. "You were a slave." Taken as a child no less. Taken from her home... I closed my eyes and shook away the comparison.

"That... and more." More? "After so long of the whip you get dulled to the horror of it all. The macabre seems normal, and that is when the claws sink in. I was told to collect slaves, so I collected them. I was told to train them, so I trained."

"T-that's... that is not you—"

"Silver Storm," she turned to look at me with piercing yellow eyes, "we understand your intentions are pure, but we kindly ask you do not attempt to justify our sins. We all have to bear the wounds of our histories, and I have committed many things that cannot be redeemed. We were not forced to do what we did, we were asked, and we complied. Regardless of anything else, we made the choice, and so we must account for it." She looked back to the moon.

"I'm sorry..." I said softly.

"We know... we... Let us finish the story. We... think you deserve to know. There were many we trained, but

there was one, years after. She kept crying, asking her why we were doing this to her. We tried to explain, explain what we were taught. But she kept crying, and crying. Eventually those above me decided she could not be trained, and were to have her killed... that is the moment when we realized what it was we had become, the true extent of our horror. We could remember being that child, so long ago, and it broke us. We refused to train any more, and we were deemed no longer useful. We too would have been killed, but instead we were given to Unity. Mother saved us from ourself, gave us a chance at redemption.” She smiled up at the moon. “But we are still looking for redemption. We see much of you in us, the pain, the hurt, the hunger for meaning. We... the two of us have done bad things.” That much was beyond question. “But we, you and us, are trying to get better, to become better. We believe the chance at redemption, it is one everypony should have.”

I closed my eyes and thought about what I heard. Me, thinking; shocking, I know. Still, so much of who Platinum Haze was seemed to make sense. The pieces fell together, and the full picture emerged. No, not the full picture. People are complex, and I didn't think I'd ever know everything there was to know about Platinum Haze, but it was more than I knew before, and I was grateful that she trusted me.

“Thank you...” I said, “for... telling me. I... “ The words fell away. “I'm sorry, it's not fair. You shouldn't have... it should have been... better...”

“We thank you for your condolences. Since the sky was cleared by The Destroyer, we have often enjoyed going out at night to look to Luna for guidance and forgiveness. It clears our mind during troubled times.” She looked back at me with her yellow eyes. “We know you must feel the same. With... what has happened. We will get her back... We promise you.”

It was hard to look her in the eyes. “I know,” I whispered. “It's... hard. I can't lose another one... not again... not Serenity.”

Confusion flashed in her eyes. “Another one?”

“I...” I wasn't sure if I should tell her, but eventually I decided that she had shared so much with me, she deserved to know the truth. “Before Serenity... back in Marefort, I... had a daughter.” The tears came unbidden to my eyes making it hard to see. Thinking about Foundation was always hard, but with Serenity taken from me... it was hard to think about, never mind talk. “It seems so long ago now bu-”

Something creaked and cut my voice short. I stood up quickly when I saw something glowing. Last time I was aboard this boat an assassin had tried to kill me, and that memory was still in my mind when I moved to stand defensively in front of Haze. “Who's there?”

A ponitron rolled out of the shadows, leaving me terribly confused. It wasn't until it spoke that I realized who it was. “Well, continue, it sounds like a lovely story.” On the ponitron's monitor was Wallkirk's smiling mug.

“What are you doing here!” The sadness from before turned into pure rage. “How did you even know where we were!”

“I bugged you.” What. This mother fucker. “To make sure our secrets remained ours, and to correct you, I am not 'here,' I am merely controlling this platform remotely. I am still safe below The Clips and Clops.” The screen smiled at me. “And I am here to help you. I could not let a future investment die, now could I? And if what you said about this 'Dragonslayer' is true, then the full force of my influence will be used to eradicate whoever is paying him.” I did not want Wallkirk there, and I did not like him eavesdropping. But having him on my side to take out whatever Dragonslayer was planning? Even in my anger I couldn't deny how useful that was.

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth. “How did you even get here?”

“Once again, I am not here, this is... oh never mind.” The robot chuckled. Could robots even compute humour? “I had a contingent of ponitrons helping guard the NCA Farm. I overrode one to use as a personal platform and used it to make sure only this boat would be hired to take you south after I heard the plans. I had attempted to make my presence known earlier, but you were indisposed, and this was the only time you've been out of your room.”

This little scene did not endear me to the computer, but... at least he was trying to help. In his own way. "Fine," I repeated. "Just don't get in the way."

"Oh I am sure you will find some use for me," he said as he wheeled off. I really was beginning to hate him. I looked over at Haze and sighed. I still owed her a story, and I needed to do something to take my mind off Serenity. Thinking about Foundation wasn't something I found enjoyable, but... it was better at that moment than thinking about Serenity.

"Sorry... about that. Let me... start from the beginning." I looked up at the moon, and leaned against Haze. She wrapped a comforting wing around me as I began to recite my story. "I guess, I should start by telling you how my mother died..."

Level Up!

Skill Note: Melee Weapons 40

((A/N: Hi there! Thanks for tuning in. I'd like to thanks Kkat for creating the world I play around in. I would also like to thank my editors theBSDude, Julep, and Menti for making this stuff readable!

Also, you may have noticed a retcon in this chapter. While I'm normally against such things, I felt it necessary in this case to fix an idiotic decision I made years ago. Anyway, the NCA Flag is now a Phoenix flying in front of a green five pointed star on a white field. It's better now, trust me. ~No One~ ))

## Chapter 29: Enemy Within

*“Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.”*

“Just follow the road,” Red Sky called down from the deck of his boat. It had been a tortuously long boat ride, and now that we had gotten as far as we could by river I was eager to get going. “It’ll merge into one of them ancient highways, and that’ll lead you right to the base.”

“Thanks.” I looked behind me to where my comrades waited patiently to get going. Except for Flare, who seemed to be in the middle of falling asleep. It wasn't my fault we were landing so early in the morning. “Anything I should know?”

Red Sky looked off into the distance as if contemplating my question. “Can’t rightly say. It’s too far away from the river for me to have ever gone, so all I’ve got are stories. There was that there balefire explosion a while back, so be prepared for radiation an’ all-that-goes with it.” I looked back at Platinum Haze and decided that wouldn't be a problem. Whatever monsters radiation could create, it’d also give her the energy to help. Even if she wouldn't fight, that shield of hers was powerful from what I’d seen.

“Alright.” I took a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“We'll wait here for you,” Red Sky said, which surprised me. “For three days. That’s as long as we can... just get your filly and bring her back. She don’t deserve what happened, and neither do you.”

“Thanks,” I replied softly before turning back to the road before us. I know they sailed the boat as fast as they could, but it still felt too long. All I could do on the ship was wait and pray (though I still wasn't sure who I’d been praying to), and that was infuriating. With ground under me I was finally able to take the matters into my hooves; even if I was only walking, I knew I was walking towards Serenity, and that was enough to keep my spirits high.

Though in reality I knew it was just as likely I was walking into a trap. Dragonslayer was no fool (as I’d learned to my horror), and he was going to be prepared to take me down. But he’d made a fatal mistake I was going to capitalize on.

He thought Serenity was my weakness. Serenity was my strength. She kept me moving when I was sore and tired. She made me smile when I wanted to cry. So long as she was taken from me, I would fight to find her, and if she were ever to be taken from the world I would destroy everything in my path until I got vengeance. Dragonslayer may not have realized it, but when he took my daughter, he had signed his own death warrant. The only thing left was to decide when and how.

To that end I took another step, my hoof kicking up dirt. The wasteland that stretched out before me was brown and rocky and plain; but it was comforting in a way, familiar. I breathed in the the stale air and kept walking, my hooves moving faster. I was coming for my daughter, and woe to anypony who dared get between me and her.

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The walk was quiet for a long time. I was sure my companions were watching me, judging me. Throughout the boat ride they had fussed over me (well, except Walkkirk, but he hardly counted.), worried about what losing Serenity had done to me. For a while it was infuriating. I understood their worries, but I had just wanted to be left alone.

As we walked though, I was glad for their worry. It was nice to have ponies care for me, to worry about my health and safety. It was not an experience I was used to, even back in Marefort. While Wildfire loved me, I don't think she ever worried about me (at least before Foundation) because it had always been my job to worry about her. To be the stable one, to hold up our... relationship.

So I welcomed the worry, even though it was unneeded. I was still... upset to say the least, but I was motivated. For so long I’d been bounced around from one moral conflict to the next. Every pony I met

seemed good and evil in parts (though some more evil than good) but it became harder and harder to see past the murk. But as I got closer to Serenity things didn't become murkier, they became clearer. Serenity was my daughter, and any who took her from me against our mutual will was evil, and if they stood in my way when I went to get her back the only moral thing would be to remove them. I want to say it was refreshing to have a black and white goal, but I don't think the word was appropriate.

"Hey, Hired, you sure you're okay?" Flare asked flying beside me. "I mean, you've been really quiet, even for you. It's kind of eerie, and you look like you're trying to set things on fire with your glare."

"I have a flamethrower for that," I replied dryly, remembering I still carried the flamethrower from the time in the tunnels that cost me my hind leg.

"Was, was that a joke?" He looked at me strangely.

"Maybe." I kept walking. It was true the greater sense of clarity was helping me focus, but that didn't mean I was in a good mood. "How much further is the canyon?"

"We do not believe it is much further," Platinum Haze said as she squinted into the distance. "It appears we are about to reach the merge with the wartime highway, and from there we were led to believe it would not be much further." Sure enough, in the distance I could see our dirt road merged into a cracked and crumbling concrete road.

"I can access the radio if you want," Walkirk chirped in his usual robotic tune. His suggestion was actually surprisingly good too, which was a nice change of pace. "I believe the funeral for that friend of yours is going on..." He paused for a few seconds before confirming. "Ah, it is. The Watchers leader... Clean Cutt, I think. He's doing the eulogy, it's rather touching." I take back calling it a good idea. That was the last thing I wanted to listen to.

Before I had the chance to protest he was already playing it. "...fought tirelessly for the good of all ponies. Like a loyal dog defending it's master she protected us and ours from the harshness of the waste from Wendin to Dise. When she died, she didn't in vain, instead she gave her life for ours, defending us, the citizens, from the machinations and political instability that sought to destroy us. She did not stand down when she saw injustice, and if she were still with us, she would not want us to stand down—."

"That's enough," I growled, "I don't need someone else telling me how to feel. I knew her. Better than him. That's not her. It's a lie to make ponies feel good. I've had enough of lies."

"Some would say a well placed lie is better than a mishandled truth," Walkirk replied. Still, he turned it off, and for that at least I was thankful.

"And besides," Flare felt the need to add, "she'd take exception to being called a dog. Pinprick would no doubt prefer 'bitch'." I gave a half-hearted smile. That was much more like Pinprick, but she'd probably go a step further and call herself a 'fucking bitch.'

"We are sad to say we did not have the pleasure to ever be properly acquainted with her, but we are certain she was a remarkable mare," Platinum Haze said as we finally reached the highway and turned to follow it.

That was one word for it. If nothing else she was straightforward. She never hid her intentions or feelings. Everything you needed to know about her, she'd let you know.

"Still, as much fun as she was, you'd think they'd give the Batmare a fancy funeral too," Flare added. "I mean, she was a bit odd, but when she kicked folk, it hurt! You remember, don't you, Hired? At the water plant, when she just slipped in and knocked out three ponies before they had a chance to think? Fucking awesome, that." How could I forget? It was the second I realized that The Batmare was possibly the most dangerous singular pony in Dise.

"The Batmare? She was a lunatic who caused more trouble than she was worth." I stared at Walkirk for a long time before dignifying that with a response.

"Without The Batmare, half of Dise would be rubble." I spoke slowly so as not to be misunderstood. "She gave her life to teleport the balefire bomb. So that nopony died. Er. Directly."

“One good act does not forgive the rest of her life.” I was beginning to doubt how much of a grasp Wallkirk really had on Dise. He claimed near omnipotence, and yet he would say such things. “For all her talk of ‘doing good’ she got in the way more than she helped.” I was starting to understand his grievances. The Batmare fought what she saw as evil, regardless of where it came from (though she did seem focused on The Laughing Stallion) so to that end I wouldn’t have been surprised if she threw a wrench into one of Wallkirk’s plans. I was sure most of the Dise gang leaders were cheering when they found out she died.

“Whatever,” I replied looking away from his smug robot face. There were more important things to do than to argue with an AI about a superhero.

Still he kept talking. “What gives her the right to show up one day and sta—.” His voice cut out to a series of static-y buzzing sounds. “S-s-s-sorry.” I couldn’t tell if he was saying that, or his platform was. “There is an incident in Dise that requires most of my processing power, I can no longer afford to control this platform for the moment. It has been given orders to follow you, I will regain control of it once the situation in Dise is settled.” With that Wallkirk’s face faded off the Ponitrons screen.

“Alright then?” Flare said. “Can’t say I’m that upset, he’s an annoying twat.”

“Although we cannot profess to disagree with your assessment, given as he is slated to become Hired’s boss, it would be in our mutual interest if you keep such thoughts to yourself for the time being,” Platinum Haze replied. I wasn’t sure if she was joking around or being serious, with her it could be hard to tell.

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“Fort Spitfire,” the plaque read. “May those who died to defend peace never be forgotten.”

We had found the entrance the army base (Fort Spitfire, apparently) an hour down the highway. The entrance to the facility was a one story building with a large pitched roof surrounded by metal fencing on every side. On the other side of the far fencing we could see the beginning of the canyon, but it was hard to tell much about it except that the other side of the canyon looked to be really far away.

I stepped away from the plaque that was hanging beside the open fence gate and looked at my companions. They tended to have a greater knowledge of history than me, but they both shrugged their confusion. Whatever the plaque meant, it was a mystery to us.

I stepped through the threshold into the south canyon base; a cold shiver ran down my back. Serenity was nearby, I could feel it. I wasn’t sure how big an army base was, but it didn’t matter to me. If I could find her in the tunnels of Dise and the maze of the mountain facility, this place would be nothing. Still, it took me a minute before I could take that second step, to keep moving. The more excited I got to find her, the more worried I became that it would all be for nothing.

“Hired?” Platinum Haze asked when she noticed my hesitation. “Are you—.”

“I’m fine,” I said sharply, taking another step towards the building. “Fine,” I repeated, more to convince myself than her.

The inside of the building (the ‘Fort Spitfire Welcome Centre’ according to the door) was dark, musty, and full of boxes. I mean absolutely full, from floor to ceiling and covering most of the floor. I nosed through a few nearby ones, but found most of them contained uniforms, clothing, and flags, oddly enough. I could only guess that this stuff was in the middle of being shipped up north when the megaspell went off, only to be forgotten about and left to rot. It was sad, in a way.

As I looked around the building I realized that it was just one huge room. It looked there had been walls in there once, but they’d been knocked down; no doubt to make room for more boxes. Which worked out, as the boxes made the entire place a sort of maze.

“This is a home decorator’s nightmare,” Flare announced when he walked in behind me. “It’s just so very tacky.” It was an attempt to lighten the mood, and I was grateful for that so I played along.

“The NCA should hire you,” I said as I attempted to navigate the maze to find the exit. “You’d fix this place right up.”

“You’re such a flatterer. Alas, my loyalties are strained enough already, what with the civil war and you pulling me every which way. There’s not enough dash in the wasteland to make me add a fourth party to the pinata that is my metaphorical life.”

I chuckled nervously and glanced over at Platinum Haze. We hadn’t really gotten around to explaining our mutual drug... affiliation with her, and I was worried about what she’d think. It wasn’t like I was some junkie... well, so long as I had my Med-X. And I recognize that wording it like that was certainly not helping my case.

I suppose I’d been lucky on the boat. With everyone worried about me, they often gave me space enough I could take some Med-X without drawing attention to myself (thank Celestia I was still well-supplied), and I had even managed to take a shot that morning. But it had been a long walk, and I could feel the cravings starting. It would be some time before I had to take one... but you know, I’d like to. It’d help calm my worries about Serenity at least.

“Hired, we believe you that should see this,” Platinum Haze called out to me from somewhere in the building. She had apparently ran off on me while I was thinking about drugs. Which also didn’t help my case. I eventually found her standing in front of a giant window frame (the window must have broken) staring out into the canyon.

I walked up to her. “What are you do—.” Then I saw it.

Stretched out before me was the south canyon base. When I heard “canyon,” I’d expected it to be similar to the canyon with the land sharks, with high walls but narrow and short. This canyon managed to be taller, with giant sloping walls awash with colour standing nearly a kilometre apart from each other, and it seemed to expand in into the horizon indefinitely, completely dwarfing the base that lay in the valley..

That’s not the say the base was small, it was anything but. It was a mess of buildings and facilities connected by roads and bridges that engulfed much of the nearby canyon. The first thing I noticed was a giant staircase that led from the welcome centre into a square of many large, thick buildings at the base. It seemed to be the hub of the base and stretched off from there. A road to the east from there eventually led into a giant crater that was half-filled-in with rubble. It was no doubt where the megaspell had gone off, and it seemed the blast was so powerful it cut into the canyon wall making a cylindrical gap in the otherwise mostly straight wall. I hoped Serenity wasn’t there, but if she were, I’d find her. To the west, however, I saw something quite the opposite. There was a giant domed structure that looked like a stadium I’d seen in pictures, but larger. It was still dwarfed by the canyon itself, but it did a good job at compensating.

It was altogether unlike anything I’d seen before.

“There is a lot to search,” Flare said as he walked up beside me. He was wrong, of course. The canyon was large, but not when compared to the entirety of the wasteland, so it was a marked improvement compared to how it could have been.

“Yeah.” It was easier to just agree though, and I didn’t feel like talking so much. “Let’s go.” Since I could see the steps from the window, I knew approximately where the exit was so I started to head in that direction.

Not that I got very far. A few steps in that direction and I was face-to-face with a rather larger monitor. A large monitor that was inexplicably on, and playing a video.

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“Hello, yes, is this thing on?” The pony on the video wore a white lab coat and a medical mask, so I took a stab in the dark and figured he was a doctor. He also looked vaguely familiar, but with most of his face covered with the mask, it might have been my imagination. “Good, okay. Boss, here’s the monthly status update as you wanted. I don’t understand why you want a video, but, ah. Yes.”

The pony coughed into his hoof and continued. “I’ll get the bad news out of the way first. The cutie-mark ascension project is simply unsuccessful. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but it’s simply not possible. All tests have been complete failures, all research has produced the same negative result. Simply put, no amount of resources or pony-power will fix the project. It’s dead in the water. Consider this a formal

request to get rid of the project and move the assets involved into other areas. This leads me into my second point.”

“Consultation with the north has resulted in a viable test subject for The Broken Arrow Project.” His voice started to raise in excitement. “After preliminary testing, the subject remains stable, and we should be able to move onto completion within the next few days.” The stallion took a breath, but still looked exhilarated.

“Sir, this is a breakthrough, and you shouldn’t need me to tell you how important this is. I think it’s important you come and see this for yourself. If this is a success, and I am positive it will be, then... well, you know. This is a momentous occasion, and it would mean a lot for everyone if you were there. Either way, we won’t start the final test until we receive a reply. We hope to hear from you soon.” He made a cutting motion across his neck and the feed dropped.

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“That was... unusual,” Platinum Haze said. “We are unsure of the time frame of this message. It could be a message from before the war, but we can’t imagine why it would play here. Additionally, we can’t imagine why it would play here if it were made after the war.”

“Maybe Dragonslayer is fucking with us,” Flare offered a reasonable suggestion to my immense surprise. “We are easy to fuck with, and it would fit his MO.”

“We suppose that is an alternative option. Though, we are curious as to how he knew when and how to play this. As it is not playing again, it cannot be on a loop.” As soon as she said that I thought I heard a sound behind me, but when I turned to look I saw nothing. It could have been my mind playing tricks on me, but still...

“It doesn’t matter.” I walked past the monitor to the door. “It’s old and irrelevant. Or an attempt to confuse us. Either way. Ignoring it’s the best option.”

“Good point,” Flare said flying after me. “Because, really, fuck Dragonslayer.” That was not what I wanted to do to him, unless ‘-ing kill’ was added.

I walked up to the door, but paused when I saw what I was walking out into. My fear of heights hadn’t gone away, and looking down at the endless steps curving down the cliff face did nothing to help it. Part of me really wanted a Med-X (well, that part being most of me), but I’d yet to mention that to Platinum Haze, so I couldn’t. Still... it would be easier if I had it.

I gulped and took a step. And just as I did Flare flew out behind me so fast I nearly lost my step. I managed to catch myself at the last second, but my heart went into my throat either way. When I looked up I saw Flare grinning at me like the doofus he was. “Race you to the bottom!” Before I could reply to him he was already halfway down the canyon. Ass.

Eventually I did make it down the steps, but at my own pace. The only pony I managed to beat down was Haze, but I think she just did it to make me feel better. Either that or because carrying that stupid robot was difficult. I was leaning towards the first option though, because Haze had a way of making the most difficult things seem easy.

“What took you so long?” Flare asked, leaning against a nearby building. “I almost fell asleep. Or maybe I did. What day is it?”

“Bite me.” I growled at Flare before looking around the complex. There were a series of large buildings in a box like formation around the centre square. The largest of the buildings was a seven story monstrosity with a single closed green door. It also looked to be one of the few buildings that was still liveable, as the others were in various stages of disrepair. It may have been my imagination, but it seemed like a few of the buildings had a new coat of paint.

I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could get a word out Wallkirk-bot made a buzzing sound and chirped back to life. “There we are!” it said. “Sorry about that.” If only he’d been gone longer than just a few hours.

“That’s it?” Flare asked impatiently, “Just ‘sorry’? Aren’t you going to tell us what’s happening in Dise.”

“It’s not important.” For better or for worse, that city was our home, and considering everything that had happened recently, I was on Flare’s side here. We deserved to know.

Flare’s eyes narrowed and I could see a scowl forming on his face. It was rare he ever got angry, but considering the Enclave coup and his relation to it, it was a perfectly understandable. “Just tell us; we don’t have time to play word games with you.”

“Fine, fine,” the robot tsked. “There was a bit of a... I don’t want to say ‘riot,’ but outpouring of frustration after the funeral. Nothing too difficult; it just took some time to properly... contain.” That did not sound good. “As I said, ‘not important’; certainly not worth derailing the mission. So if we could be on our way....”

“Oh, lovely.” Flare rolled his eyes. “You know, for a secret dictator who apparently controls Dise, you sure don’t seem to do much.”

When Wallkirk spoke again, his electronic voice seemed to have an annoyed edge. “Dise is not a simple place, and it gets more complex with the day. It takes work to maintain balance, and it must be done carefully. Canterlot wasn’t built in a day.”

“I’d like to see how you maintain balance.” Flare seemed to take exception to Wallkirk’s assurances, and once again I was on his side. “Unless this is what you consider maintaining balance. A balefire bomb goes off over your city, and you don’t have a clue who did it or why. There is a Enclave coup, and once again you’re helpless to predict, stop, or even delay it! Now there’s rioting in the streets, by your own admission, and still you can’t do anything.”

“Give it time,” Wallkirk assured. Or tried to, anyway. “I am just one pony, but with time, I can fix the issues, bring back the status quo.”

Flare sneered and, uh, flared out his wings. “Dise doesn’t have time; we don’t have time! The city is dying; it’s people are dying! You’ve lost control, and as soon as everyone else realizes how weak the gangs are, there will be change, but it won’t be you, it’ll be Skyfall, or Dragonslayer, or Molly, or someone else ambitious enough to capitalize and then everything you’ve worked to maintain will come crumbling down. You’re either in control, or you aren’t. And as far as I can see, you aren’t.”

Wallkirk did not say anything, but on his monitor his face contorted into a scowl.

“Not now. Argue later.” I said walking between the two. “We need to find Serenity. Then we can worry about Dise.” I looked around the various buildings in the plaza. Huh... the large building with the green door, I had sworn that door was closed before... “We need to look for clues. Flare, can you do a flyby... just. Not too far away. Look for anything that could be a clue. Wallkirk and Platinum Haze. Look through these buildings. I’ll look through the large one.” There, we had a plan. It wasn’t a good one, or an encompassing one, but it got us working and not arguing.

The three of them turned to me when I gave my proposal. They must have agreed because at once they all turned to the tasks I asked of them. Which left me to investigate the large building with its magically opening door.

I trotted off in silence. When I entered through the green door, I found myself in what must have been a waiting area of sorts. It was rather spacious, with the remains of benches against one wall and a service counter in the other. Luckily for me the lights (at least in that part of the building) were still working. I carefully looked around to see if there were signs that anypony had been in there recently (as I suspected) but I found nothing in that room.

So I moved on to hallways just outside the entrance area. It split off in two directions running the length of the building, though only the right side still had light. I never did explore either side though because I noticed that one of the doors in the hallway was still open, the one that led to the stairs. As I entered the stairwell cautiously I thought I heard a faint buzzing sound from somewhere above.

I’m still not sure if I heard that buzzing sound, but I did hear the loud zap that followed it.

At that point I was positive something was fishy, so I raced up the stairs. As much as I hated heights, I didn't really mind stairs. I made it up the seven floors without breaking much of a sweat, but by the time I got there whatever made the sound was gone. The only evidence that anything was there was a black mark on the wall that was still smoking.

"Oh fuck this." I growled. Now that I knew something was there, I was determined to find it and destroy it. I didn't like being stalked, and I knew it was just one of Dragonslayer's games (that bastard).

It wasn't hard to figure out where to go next, because once again there was only one open door in the hallway. I was starting to wonder if I wasn't being lead by the nose here. Not that it would stop me, if I'd proven anything I'd proven that I was adept at stumbling into traps.

This time the conveniently open door led to what I guessed was supposed to be the barracks of the building, though why they put the beds on the top floor I couldn't figure out. It was also terribly cramped, with little room between the row of tiny cubical-like bedding areas and the wall. For regular ponies you might have been able to fit two beside each other down the hallway, but I was large enough I filled it up easily. It just seemed really cramped, but then again maybe that was on purpose.

As I walked bed after bed I realized that there were actual beds there. They weren't new, but they were well maintained. I could only guess that the NCA used this building a lot before the place had to be evacuated...

Before I had the chance to ponder the building's evacuation, I saw something. Someone. He was crouched down on the floor slowly rocking back and forth wearing what looked like tattered NCA armour. I was positive that I'd found my stalker.

Until he looked at me, and I saw he was missing half his face.

The ghoul screamed and charged.

I barely had the presence of mind to get my leg up in time. The ghoul chomped hard down at my cybernetics, but all it got was broken teeth.

Behind me I heard another scream. When I turned to look all I saw through the flickering lights were sharp teeth. I was starting to think the breadcrumbs (the metaphorical kind) that led me here were just a part of a trap. Or maybe I had shitty luck.

Or, as a third possible option, the ghouls were the ones with the bad luck. After all, there were only three ghouls behind me, and the one biting me. Compared to what I've killed, four ghouls was a walk in the park.

The first one charging at me got a shotgun in the chest, courtesy of my new cybernetic attachment. It flew back, tangling up its fellows, which gave me time to heft up the ghoul biting onto me, and toss him over my shoulder into the crowd. That gave me more than enough time to turn around (The cramped hallway made it difficult, but I was nothing if not resourceful) and unleash a torrent of flames from the flamethrower I "borrowed" from the minotaurs.

Did you know burnt ghouls smell like bacon? It's shameful, but I would be lying if I said it didn't make me a little bit hungry. It also made me want to puke, so I think it evens out.

I didn't leave right away, not because I wanted to watch ghouls burn, but because I was worried they'd get back up and I'd have flaming ghouls chasing me. It also gave me plenty of time to take a Med-X without Haze noticing. It was hard enough to take some on the ship, but travelling made it worse and it wasn't like the cravings were going anywhere. I wasn't sure how Flare was doing with his dash... thing, but I made it my business not to pry. So long as he was still doing what we needed from him...

Once I was positive the ghouls weren't going to get back up I turned around and continued down the cramped hallway. It occurred to me as I was walking away that the fire might spread, but it didn't look like it was spreading so I didn't worry. Because I'm a genius.

At the end of the rooms with all the beds was yet another hallway, because this building didn't have nearly enough of those. Beyond that though I found yet another open door. At that point I was clearly being led, but I was curious. And I couldn't really go back the way I came, not with all the smoke.

I'm pretty sure the room I entered was a classroom, at least judging from the rows of desks that surrounded a giant monitor on the far wall. There was only one exit though, so I wasn't entirely sure where else I was going to be led.

The monitor flickered to life, and I realized I'd been led there.

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"Are you certain she is stable?" The video I was watching seemed to have been taken from a security camera. It was a grainy black and white recording of a hallway, with only one pony in view (I think it was the same doctor from the previous video) with the voice coming from just off screen. That voice though, I swear it sounded familiar. "All previous attempts looked promising too until—."

"I'm positive." The doctor interrupted. She then immediately realized what she had done and turned almost white, "I mean, sorry."

"No, speak." The voice was male, probably a young-to-middle-aged pony stallion. "I am intrigued to see what about subject six makes you so confident."

"Oh, um. Ahm." She coughed lightly into her hoof before continuing. "I don't need to repeat to you the failures of subject one and two." She grimaced, "but subjects three through five were different. We had thought previously that they showed no signs of rejection before their... demise. But upon reviewing the records I saw something startling." She dug through her saddlebags with her magic and floated a clipboard off screen. "See here, look at their heart rates and MRI scans, what do you notice?"

"They're consistent with a pony undergoing burnout." The pony off screen said without a hesitation. "So?"

"I think that is what killed them, the burnout." She took a deep breath, I guessed to gather her thoughts. "My theory is that by combining the megaspell directly with them—" Wait wait wait. My heart nearly stopped in my chest when I realized what these recordings were. The importance of them. But why was Dragonslayer showing them to me?—"—that it overloaded them. Their bodies weren't used to the influx of magic going through them. It worked like a magical burnout. When a unicorn goes through burnout they use their bodies' natural energy as a replacement for magical energy when they're depleted, severely weakening them, and since these ponies were not used to the magic their bodies kept using energy to try and stabilize the megaspell until they expired. Look, you can see, the one unicorn, subject four, she lasted three days longer than the others, because she used her own magic in combination with her natural energy."

"Well done." The mare beamed with pride, and it just made me want to puke more. The off-screen stallion continued, "But that explains the problem, not the solution."

"Yes, yes, sorry, I just had to. Sorry." She dug through her bag again, producing a stack of what looked like mouthwritten notes. "My recommendations for the new procedure we attempted with subject six. I know we should have waited for you, sir, but—."

"I understand." Magic wrapped around the papers, but it wasn't coming from the doctor. I guess the mysterious voice was a stallion. "Time waits for no pony." There was a brief sound of paper flipping.

"S-so. The solution was to create the megaspell first." She stood up straighter, seemingly impressed with her monstrous science. "We were following the plans laid down for Simple Heart." Whoever these ponies were, they had access to the data about Simple Heart. This seemed important. "But we forgot: Simple Heart was a failure. If it wasn't for the nature of the megaspell he would have died too, I'm sure. But, if we create the megaspell first, then bind it with the subject, the megaspell will already be stable and not require the pony's energy to stabilize."

"But there could still be rejection?" The voice asked.

"Yes, maybe. It's been a week longer than all the rest. I think we got it. Sir, this will work."

"Good, good. Is the subject safe to visit?"

"What, oh yes! Certainly. I can explain more once you see the subject. Be warned, she is heavily sedated... heavily. She is more resistant than I would have expected." The mare turned and started walking

down a side hallway. When she did I saw something in the corner of the screen. The voice off the screen had turned, and I could just barely see his flanks. I was hoping to see if it was a cutie-mark I remembered, but instead it was all scar tissue.

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I coughed loudly as the video stopped. Huh, when did the room get so smokey. It must have been the old video machine struggling to work.

“So what did you think?” A voice echoed through the room. Without thinking I crouched down into a fighting position ready to stab the next thing I saw. Only I saw nothing, because the voice was coming through an old speaker system.

“Dragonslayer.” I growled, recognizing the voice.

“Not much of a critique.” Have I mentioned how many ways I was going to kill him? “I see you found your way here, and faster than I expected... which was to be expected. See, this is the reason I choose to undertake the task of removing you from the equation. You are too unpredictable and too dangerous. It’s a terrible combination for such a delicate operation.”

“Don’t talk in riddles.” I spat, though I don’t think he could see it. “Come and fight me if you’re so secure.”

“I would rather you come to me.” He sighed audibly. “I wish it didn’t have to come to this. My benefactor wanted to try and convince you to join him, but I knew it wouldn’t work. Still, if we must fight you need to come to me. I’m sure you saw the stadium when you entered the canyon, I’m waiting there for you. With Serenity.” The voice clicked and I screamed a wordless curse.

That bastard. So much death.

My rage was cut off by a hacking cough. What was going on. I looked back towards the door I came through and saw thick black smoke pouring into the room.

Oh yeah, the flamethrower.

Before I could think of a plan of escape something charged through the door. A ghoul. On fire. Just my luck.

I'm not sure why it decided it was feeding time but it charged at me as soon as it saw me. The heat was intense when it came close to me, but I was fortunate to still be wearing the fireproof barding the minotaurs made for me.

I caught the ghoul with my hooves, and used it's momentum to toss it across the room, and through a window. Oh look an escape route.

I took two steps towards the shattered glass when I felt an odd heat on my head... on my...

MY MANE!

Instinct took over when I realized my mane was not fireproof. I stopped, dropped, and rolled like my life depended on it.

After I was certain it was out, and a few more rolls after that, I stopped. I felt my mane with my hoof and to my relief it wasn't completely gone, just much shorter and a bit crispy. Taking a deep breath I looked back towards the window...

To see Flare staring at me with a bewildered expression. “When we saw the flaming ghoul fall six stories we knew it had to be you. Need help?”

“Help.” I coughed out as I made a beeline for the window.

“S-silver!” Platinum Haze was flying beside Flare, she must have seen the flaming ghoul too. “What are you doing? We, we desire to know that you are well!”

“I will be if you get me out of here.” I said through the window. Thankfully she complied, lifting me through the window with her magic (My shoulder burned at the magic, but that was better than the rest of me burning). I was so happy to be out of the burning building that I barely noticed the height. Barely. I would

have freaked out at how high we were if we didn't immediately descend before I had the chance.

"Now," Haze said when she put me back on solid ground, "are you injured anywhere, do you require any healing you... your mane..." She frowned. "It's shorter... we should cut it, to make it even." I waved a dismissive hoof, "Well, we did not mean to intend to suggest would would perform that action at this present juncture."

"No, I mean." I stood up to my shaky hooves and looked back at the building I just escape. Flames were bursting out of the top floor, and seemed to be spreading quickly... I didn't mean to do that, but when I heard the screams of the ghouls inside I wondered if maybe it was for the best. "I know where Serenity is." I said sternly, and started to walk. The others didn't need to hear anything more and started to follow.

---

"Are you sure we can trust him?" Wallkirk said as we walked down a long concrete road half carved into the side of the cliff. We were moving towards the giant stadium, but it didn't seem fast enough.

"Of course not." I answered without a second thought. "He's clearly planning a trap. But for the trap to work. We need to be there. Where he wants."

"So how do you plan to avoid said trap." Wallkirk kept talking, even though I had thought I was being completely clear. "I don't have so many of these ponitrons I can have one wrecked so far away that I wouldn't be able to repair it."

"Avoid?" I shook my head. "No, we spring the trap. We endure it, then kill him."

"Uh... why is it you are the leader of your little group anyway?" The robot turned it's head to look at Haze and Flare, to see if they were going to back him up.

"We have endured far more pain and hardship than a single pony could possibly hope to inflict, even one as insidious as Dragonslayer. We are certain that he overestimates his plan, and Silver will prevail against any attempts to harm her or our persons."

"I've got power armour and fifty pounds of explosives on me at all times. I'd like to see his trap: I'm sure it'll be cute."

They obviously did not agree.

"And when in doubt, we just throw Silver at the problem. She usually comes back with fewer body parts, but she's still got plenty of those left. Personally, I think she was supposed to die a long time ago, but scared Death into giving her a few more years." Flare chuckled.

It was probably true. I tried to count all the times I'd nearly died, but I lost track pretty quick. Suffice it to say, my continued existence was more due to luck than any skill. And judging from the speed at which I lost body parts, if I continued at the pace I was going I wouldn't last another month. Still, I couldn't give up, not until Serenity had a place where she could live that was free of assholes like Dragonslayer.

"You are a wonder," Wallkirk said. "Where are you even from? All reports I have mention you coming from the north, but you don't look like you're from one of the hill tribes."

"She's a mystery wrapped in an enigma, our Hired Gun," Flare commented.

"Near the border of Equestria. Town called Marefort."

"The border?" Wallkirk pressed; it was aggravating. "My spies indicated that that area is under raider control."

"It is." Maybe the ponitron has a mute button. I resolved to look for it as soon as possible. "Town was under raider control. Why do you care?"

"Well... I was just prodding for information before... but given where you are from... have you seen any stables?" That was an odd question.

"Near Marefort?" It was more of a rhetorical question, as I knew what he meant. "Yeah stable... 42." I did

my best not to think too hard about the stable.

“You've been *inside* the stable?” Wallkirk sounded almost breathless... for a robot. “How does it look?”

“Why do you care.” I didn't want to remember how it looked.

“That..” He smiled. “Memories. Stable 42 is technically in Caledonia lands, and... I'm not sure how well you know history...” The robot looked at me. “Not a lot. Well, many Caledonian stables went... incomplete after a controversy. Turns out Stable Tec was building them smaller than Equestrian stables, something about a smaller population needing fewer. Either way there was an uproar and the remaining projects were sold, I bought that one. I had intended to move the Crusader Maneframe there and use it as my base of operations... well things didn't go to plan.”

“Shocking!” Flare interrupted. “A plan of yours going wrong? Will wonders never cease.”

“This, this was not of my doing. You can thank The Zebras and Equestria for it, I surely cannot be blamed for ending the world, can I?”

“Give me five minutes, I'll think of a way.” Flare was probably smirking under his helmet.

“Enough.” I said as the road reached an end. We weren't at the Stadium, instead we were at another cluster of buildings, and I was worried we'd find more ghouls there. “We need to be on guard.” I walked towards the square of buildings to get a sense of where we were. The Stadium was still a ways off, but we were at an impasse.

The bottom of the canyon had its own little crests and valleys. The road we were on had been sloping upwards, but in one spot it dipped down to form a little mini canyon. This new obstacle had another road across it that we could not reach without an annoying amount of rock climbing. I suppose it was possible to just fly across, but I didn't want to wear Platinum Haze out anymore than possible. I was counting on her to take Serenity to safety while I dealt with Dragonslayer.

As I looked for an alternate option I thought I noticed a bridge spanning the gap. It would make sense, considering this was supposedly a military base, but I wasn't sure. Too many buildings were lined up right against the crevasse, blocking my view.

So I had to go take a closer look by squeezing in between two buildings. Sure enough there was a bridge, or rather there had been a bridge. Most had collapsed into the ravine. On the bright side there was an alternate path. One of the buildings built a causeway between it and a building across the way, acting as a covered bridge.

“What are we looking for?” Apparently Platinum Haze had followed me, possibly worried I was going to get into another tussle with flaming ghouls. That was really unlikely though.

A horrifying screech echoed as soon as I thought that.

I turned as quickly as I could. The sound wasn't coming from there, I realized too late. It was coming from above. I looked up just in time to see a ghoull crawl out of a window from one of the buildings we were beside, and drop straight down.

It landed on Haze before I could warn her.

“Haze!” I tried to get a shoot off with Subtlety, but Haze panicked, rearing up in surprise.

“WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS!” Haze tried to buck the ghoull off, but all it did was make it more tenacious. The creature bit down hard on her wing eliciting a sudden screech. “WE DEMAND YOU LEAVE!” Magic wrapped around the ghoulls, and before it could get another bite the creature was flung across the canyon, “BEGONE VILE BEAST!”

With a flash of purple the 'beast' was thrown far across the canyon. I didn't see exactly where it went, because I had looked to inspect Haze's wing. “Are you okay?” I asked quickly. Turns out me inspecting the wing didn't mean much as I knew nothing about medicine. There was blood though, and that was never good.

't really care about that.

“Hey!” Flare was galloping over, “What happened, is everyone okay?” He looked at Haze's bloody wing and grimaced, “Oh. Well, can't you do that radiation thing? Heal it right up.”

“There is no radiation here; we...,” Platinum Haze trailed off and looked around, immensely puzzled. “There is no radiation here. Why is there no radiation here?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, but then I realized. This place was megaspelled only a few months ago. It was huge news, and there were ghouls everywhere, but... no radiation. Nothing. Wasn't that stuff supposed to last forever? And yet... “You're right...”

Platinum Haze lifted her head into the air and started to sniff. “Yes... we had thought something had seemed odd since we got here. There should be radiation. Megaspells always leave an after effect; this is implicit in their design.”

“I bet if we ask Dragonslayer he'd know,” Flare suggested, which just made me scowl even though it was probably true. “If you can't use radiation, do you have a healing potion?”

Platinum Haze shook her head. “I am afraid I do not...”

“I always let Serenity carry the healing potions.” I added. “I have some med-x though, if that'd help?” Not that I really wanted to part with my med-x... but giving away wouldn't be that bad, right?

Platinum Haze gave me a confused look. “It is a small wound; we could use healing, but a painkiller won't be effective. Don't worry about us...” She tried to spread her wings out to show how fine she was, but she winced before they were even half unfurled and brought them back to her sides. “We are fine.”

“There's plenty of buildings around.” Like the one the ghoul jumped out of. “We'll check them for a healing potion.”

“No, we would hate to slow down your search. We do not require healing at this juncture; let us just move forward.”

“That'll be difficult, considering the whole gap thing, and you not being able to fly. I doubt I could carry Silver that far, she's been putting on weight.” I glared at Flare, as usual.

“There's a bridge.” I pointed to it, because apparently everyone else was blind. “Goes through a building. We can do both things.” Before anypony could argue I turned away, intending to walk away,

Instead I was face to, er, monitor with Wallkirk, “What was that you were saying about radiation?”

I pushed passed the robot mumbling, “Don't fucking eavesdrop.” I probably should have shown more deference considering he was going to be my boss, but I couldn't muster up the will to care. He must not have cared either because he still followed me, though it was only after the others had passed him.

The building with the bridge connected wasn't that hard to find, given it was the largest building in the area. I looked up to see if it had a sign or anything (I was curious) but if it did it was long gone, so I was left to guess what the building was used for. Curiously, when I walked towards the door to open it, I saw that it was ajar.

I furrowed my brow and wondered if I was being led again. Though if I were it was a lot less conspicuous than it was before. We didn't have time to waste though so I cracked open the door and peered inside, only to find it depressingly dark and dusty. Unlike the other buildings in the area, I wasn't certain this one had been refurbished and used by the NCA. I tapped on my pipbuck light, and just to be safe this time, I took off my eye-patch and let my cybernetic eye whirr into activity.

Once I walked into the building it took just a second for the night vision to turn on, letting me see clearer. My pipbuck's EFS didn't show anything, but I really never trusted that thing. Besides the fact that it picked up things like radroaches as enemies, it also couldn't tell what floor things were on, making it useless most of the time, especially in large, old buildings.

“Looks clear,” I said cautiously. The others entered at my word and took their own look around,

each providing a little extra light to help. “The building is big. How are we going to find the bridge?” It was one of those sorts of buildings where the developer got too hallway-happy and you could get turned around easily.

“Well,” Flare walked over to a wall while talking, “we could search the building for hours in the vain hope of finding what we’re looking for... or we could use this map.” Map? I walked over to see what he was looking at and sure enough it was a building plan that happened to give the exact location of the bridge (and every other room in the building).

“We could use that,” I conceded. “Through that door.” I pointed to a nearby door. “Two stories up and...” That same door opened.

“Oh fuck that.” I turned and started galloping towards it.

Flare said something, and Haze cried after me. I didn’t listen. Something was playing with me, I was sure of it, and I intended to figure out who, or what!

I bust through the door into a hallway. My EFS showed an amber dot in front of me, and something moved in the range of my night-vision, but I couldn’t see what because it fled through another door before I had the chance. “Get back here!”

I screamed as I chased after the... thing. It was possible the others thought I was having (another) mental breakdown, but I didn’t care. Dragonslayer’s little game was pissing me off.

I reached the door the thing darted through. More stairs. That was no problem though, because I knew where it was going. A door opened above me, and a few seconds later I was at that door and going through it.

and it was two steps ahead of me, but I wasn’t sure why. As I sped into the bridge I still wasn’t sure why, but I was close.

It was a ball, a floating metal ball with wings. As soon as I saw it the ball turned in mid-air to, uh, look at me I think. It didn’t have eyes, but the face of it was clearly seeing me. “Get back here!” I lunged at it, but it slipped away before I could get a grip

The metal ball buzzed at me before floating off, “Oh no you don’t!” I scrambled to my hooves and chased after it. “Get back here!” Dammit. It ducked through a window before I could get close to it, and short of diving through the window it was out of reach.

Safely out of my reach the robot flying thing turned in mid air. “Hello, Silver.” Fucking Dragonslayer spoke through the device. “I did not expect you to actually find this device.”

“What the hell are you playing at?!”

“Context,” the robotic voice chirped. “Giving you context, so that later, you will understand.” By that he meant playing mind games with me. “Have you ever seen one of these?” He answered himself before I could. “I didn’t think so, they are quite rare this far south.”

“Shut up.” If I couldn’t catch the thing, I’d just kill it. I aimed down my sights and-

“Bad Silver.” A hot bolt of plasma impacted my forehead sending my head snapping back. By the time I had regained my sense the robot was flying away too fast, but still talking. “You better hurry up.”

Before I had the chance to scream another obscenity Flare Haze and Wallkirk came running down the bridge.

“What the hell Hired?” I shot Flare a glare when he spoke, but since when has that ever stopped him? “Just going off an adventure, or what?”

“Dragonslayer was spying on us with a robot. Chased it up here.” I frowned and looked off in the direction the robot flew... towards the stadium.

“We must ask you, was it round?” I turned to Haze and just blinked. “Was the robot round, and flying? We are wondering, that is.” I nodded slowly, not sure what she was getting at. “We see, it must have been a Sprite-bot then... we were simply confused because to my knowledge they were only common in Equestria.”

“So what.” I turned towards the other end of the bridge. “We have things to do. Can’t worry about robot.” More mind games, maybe hinting that his benefactor was someone who lived in the north... or maybe it was nothing. Either way it was irrelevant to our task, and I wouldn't let myself get distracted by it.

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“Ah.” Wallkirk said as we reached the door to the stadium, only to find it cut off by a glowing purple force field. “Did you know I invented this type of spell, well not me personally, but I was the brains behind the project. It’s called a ma—”

“Magical resonance force field.” Wallkirk turned, a confused face on his monitor. “It’s a spell, that reacts to a certain magic... something. I forget the word. But only spells from certain ponies. Otherwise it won’t go down.” I looked over at Haze, “Like if Platinum were to use a spell—” Her horn started glowing to show off, though I hadn’t expected her to. Just like the last time I saw one, a normal spell made a part of the barrier closest to her horn glow and warm up, but that’s all. “Yeah, that. You need a special key. Magic key.” I was impressed at my own recollection.

“I take it you’ve seen one before?”

“A few.” Well, many in the facility, but I tried not to think of that. “One in your old office.” I smiled coyly at him. “I don’t have the key for this though.”

“We would like to add that we too lack the prowess to open this door as well...” It was good she said that, as I was about to ask. It was a long shot, but when it came to magic Platinum Haze used to be psychically connected to a demigoddess of pure magic, so it was always worth asking.

“So we’re stuck?” Wallkirk didn’t seem that upset.

“I doubt it,” Flare scoffed. “Dragonface wouldn’t know how to create a barrier like this; there’s probably another entrance, or a hole or something.”

Wallkirk looked up at Flare, a smirk placed electronically on his monitor. “This barrier has lasted two hundred years, due to one of my projects. I suppose not everything I touch is a disaster after all, pegasus.” Here we go again.

“Except, it’s, you know, blocking our way. So if you want to take credit for it, be my guest,” Flare said smugly. It seemed he really enjoyed taking the piss out of Wallkirk, not that I could blame him. I did hope it didn’t hurt my future job prospects though.

However, I was not in the mood to listen to bickering, so I started to walk around the perimeter of the building. Dragonslayer had entered the building somehow, and if that door was closed there had to be another one. When the others saw I was not putting up with their silly games, they shut their mouths and followed me.

It didn’t take long for me to find the entrance I was looking for, though... it was not what I was expecting. There was a five metre wide hole in through the outer-wall of the building that was completely black with soot and smelled like smoke. It was like someone burned through it with a really large flamethrower, but when I walked through the hole it was cool to the touch. It must have happened a while before.

I paused when I got into the building proper, and took a deep breath. Serenity was in the building, I knew it. She was just a few minutes away, and after so long, I was scared. Dragonslayer wouldn’t just let me have her back... No, he’d use her, try to break me... like what happened with—

I cut off the thoughts with a stamp of my hoof. Not again. I wouldn’t lose Serenity.

This time, I’d win.

“This building looks to be large,” Platinum Haze said beside me. “Perhaps we should split up and search the building; it would be faster.”

“No.” I pointed to the lights on the ceiling, and motioned down the hall where there was a split. “Only one path has light. There must be limited power. Follow the lights, find Serenity.” And Dragonslayer.

It was as good a plan as any, and knowing Dragonslayer he was going to lead me right there. So I followed the light and ran. The hallways passed by without me noticing, stairs and rooms and windows, all became a blur. Nothing but my single-minded determination to find Serenity mattered. Just the run and the lights, and what would come when I followed them.

There was a rising sense of urgency in my gut as I ran. The feeling that I might be too late, that it was a fool's errand that... I closed my eyes only for a second to collect myself, but I never stopped running. I couldn't think of the possibilities, I couldn't imagine the horrible outcomes. I had to have faith. Serenity would survive.

She had to.

I turned a corner and stopped running, though the lights didn't go out. There was a pony standing there, next to a window. I recognized her, from the videos Dragonslayer had been playing.

"Number six." She said when she saw me. "It took you long enough. Don't worry, I won't hurt you." She tried to make herself sound soothing, though I wasn't sure why. "Come, see this. Dragonslayer wants you to see."

"See what." I croaked, inching my way closer. Whatever she wanted me to see was beyond the window she was standing next to.

"Your daughter." I sped up until I was standing beside the doctor looking out through the window.

It led to a small room with a projection screen on one end, and a single desk. What mattered to me, the only thing that mattered to me was that Serenity was there. Sitting at the desk, her head down. I slammed my hoof into the glass. Anything that was between me and her was going to break, yet the glass didn't and my hoof bounced off it.

"You won't break it." The doctor said. "It's designed to take up to a fifty-calibre rifle without breaking, not even you can get through. The only way you'll get to her is through the door, and I have the key."

"Let me in." I realized then that I was alone. The others must have fallen back, to get Wallkirk up the stairs perhaps. It didn't matter, they would be with me soon enough, and Serenity was right there.

"Dragonslayer wants you to listen." She seemed nervous, perhaps it was because of the look in my eyes. She brought up a remote control and pressed a button that let me hear into the room, and it was the last mistake she would ever make.

Inside, a pony I didn't recognize spoke. I hadn't even realized they were there, but they spoke. "Your mother didn't care about you." My heart stopped in my chest. "If she did do you think she would let you get captured? I've been trying to tell you." The voice paused, and I saw the pony walk over to Serenity to get closer. "She sold you."

"N-no..." Serenity was crying. Her head on the desk, sobs wracking her body. "N-no. She c-cares. She wouldn't."

"She sold you," the pony inside repeated, his voice deathly serious. "She doesn't care about you."

"S-she d-doesn't care."

My vision went red.

---

"I don't care." My voice was hard, I had to suppress everything I felt. I had to tell her that, I had to or she'd die.

I looked down at Foundation, caught in a cage, all alone, blood matting her mane and told her I didn't care if she lived or died.

Star Belle and I tried to counter attack the raiders, to save those who had been captured... but we failed. Star Belle broke a leg, I was disarmed. We killed a few, but there were too many, we were overrun. Marefort had fallen, and I was taken capture with the rest.

But I had made them angry, I had killed some of them, fought back, so they said they were going to make an example of me. When they found out Foundation was my daughter they took me too her, told me... told me either I break her heart or they'd kill her.

"B-b-but Momma." Tears sparkled in her ruby eyes.

"No." My voice was harsh, it had to be. I had to be believable. "Don't call me that." I saw all hope leave her. She fell down, weeping in a ball, crying. I had abandoned her. I could never forget what I did, but I did it for her. I had to break her, make her cry or else... the choice was easy. Let her die, or let her think I didn't care when she needed me the most.

She had to live. I couldn't let her die because of my mistake...

But she would. My mistakes ruined her.

---

The doctor was right when she said the glass wouldn't break. Despite my best efforts, the safety glass stood strong. However, the walls around it keeping it in place did not hold up nearly as well, and the whole thing came crashing down. I stood up, on shaky feet, and looked back to the doctor. To show her.

The doctor was already dead. I'd killed her. With a gun or a sword or a kick, it didn't matter. She was dead and her blood pooled on the ground, but I didn't care. She came between me and my Serenity.

"Momma!" My eyes fell to Serenity, he grey eyes glistening with tears.

"Serenity..." I whispered, my voice hard and hoarse, and almost too quiet to hear. But I did hear. So did Serenity. She smiled, a small frightened smile, but one filled with hope. Hope that the other pony was trying to take from her.

I walked past Serenity. I wasn't done. More blood needed spilling.

---

"You said she would live!" I screeched at my captors who had me chained down. "You promised!" I pulled at the chains, tried to break them. Had to break them. In the room across from me was Foundation, crying, screaming. They dragged her in there, and I could hear her but she couldn't hear me.

"Ya should'a listened better," a raider said, cracking me on the back of the head. It should have hurt, there should have been pain. Instead I just pulled harder at the chains. "We said we wouldn't kill her... but we ain't."

Screams from the other room. Foundation. I had to stop this madness. I had to...

"We're gunna leave that up to her."

The chains bound me in place. Constrained my strength, made me helpless.

Screams came from the other room. Foundation.

She was hurting, they were hurting her, more than I could have imagined. I made her hopeless, I took away her momma. And they were hurting her.

Because I fought back, because I tried to take on too much, I failed her.

My stupidity would kill my Foundation.

---

There was so much blood. Who knew a pony could have so much blood. It was all over the floor, and covered my legs. Some was even in my mouth. It tasted like iron and justice.

The pony was dead, beaten to a pulp. He might have screamed for help. Good, let him scream like Foundation screamed.

The corpse didn't look like a corpse, it looked like an overripe tomato that had been dropped. And it was

missing a leg...

No, not missing, there it was across the room. Good, it was better there, he didn't deserve it. He deserved death.

And he was dead. That could only be a good thing. I killed him, made him suffer, I know he suffered because he screamed, oh how he screamed. It was music to my ears. If only I could have made the raiders scream too. What a day of retribution.

Yes, that's what it was. He may have cried for mercy, but he didn't deserve it. It was bloody retribution, blood for blood. And he had so much of it to give.

It made me laugh, though I knew it wasn't funny. I couldn't stop laughing.

What a joke I was. Full of blood and rage, taking revenge on a pony for an even he wasn't there for. He deserved it though....

---

Eventually Smooth Tongue's forces took the town back. It was a lesson for the whole town. We thought we could be independent, apart from Smooth Tongue. But we learned, and what good timing it was for Smooth Tongue that we were taught a lesson and he was able to show how much we needed him to defend us. How fortuitous.

They found me hugging Foundation's corpse, though I couldn't remember how I got there. Her face was blue, and the rope was still tied around her neck, and she was red with blood, her blood. Maybe my blood too. There was so much of it.

They had to pry me off of her, but I didn't want to let go. It was my fault. I made her lose hope.

I tried to protect her, and I failed.

Without hope she was lost, and when the raiders started... they gave her the rope, they made it her choice, but it was my choice in the end. I gave up on her, and that made her give up.

Foundation died because I failed. Her ruby eyes were closed when I found her, and I would never see joy in them again.

How do you get up and keep going when you destroyed everything that mattered to you? I tried to forget. Tried to pretend to forget. I ran across the wastes. Got Wildfire killed... got more ponies killed. Their names would be etched onto my soul, and they would always hold me back.

Foundation. Wildfire. My past. No matter how far I ran they would follow. Maybe I had to stop running, to accept. To move forward.

When they finally pried me off Foundation I cried out. Told her that I still loved her. That I was sorry. It wasn't good enough, she would never know how much I really cared for her... and that hurt worst of all.

---

"Momma?"

I was hugging Serenity, liked I'd hugged Foundation. There were tears like before too, and blood. But Serenity was alive...

"Momma..." She sounded worried, about me. I should have been the one worried about her.

"I'm okay..." It was hard to speak. "You're o-okay... never again... I'll never leave you again... never." I sniffled. "I p-promise." I would tell her, I decided then, and Platinum Haze, and even Flare. Let them know what happened before... and if they thought I deserved it maybe they could help me through...

"I know..." She nuzzled into my chest. "I never thought... I know he was a liar. You're not like..." Her voice drifted away and I just held her. Behind me I could hear the others. They must have caught up. They were talking, but I didn't hear. It didn't matter. Nothing else mattered.

“I... I have something for you.” I reached into my bag and produced Scootaborg. “I-i found her. I know she means a lot....”

Serenity’s eyes went wide and she took the toy gently from my with her magic, holding it in front of her. “Thank you.... I missed her... and you....” She gulped. “I knew you’d come....”

“Always.” I had to stand. I wanted to stay there hugging Serenity forever until the memories faded, but I had to get up. There was still one thing left to do. “W-we need to get up.” Serenity nodded quietly, disentangling herself from me. All the while her grey eyes stayed on me, as if she were afraid if she looked away...

“What happened here?” Flare asked. I reluctantly took my eyes away from Serenity. Behind the window where the glass was Flare Haze and Walkirk stood, staring at all the blood.

“I killed them,” I said of the two bodies.

“Silver, you know we cannot ap—,” Haze started to speak, but I had to cut her off.

“It doesn’t matter. They’re dead..”

She stared at me sternly for a few seconds before slowly nodding. “We understand.”

“Serenity.” I looked back to my daughter. “Do you still have your gun?” I smiled when I saw that she had balanced Scootaborg on her back.

“Y-yea.” She was smiling, I saw. It was weak, and strained, but it was a smile, and that meant a lot. She pulled the gun from her backpack, my shoulder burning as she used her magic. “There’s no ammo... they took it.”

“I have some...” I’d always kept most of the extra supplies. “In my pack, take it.” There still might be ghouls around, or other ponies that needed to die....

She took the ammo from my pack and slammed it into her gun. She hovered the gun in front of her, ready... I think it made her feel better. Having something to defend herself with. “T-thanks, momma.”

“We need to go,” I said to everyone. “Find Dragonslayer and....”

Before I could keep talking the projector screen at the far side of the room turned on, and started to play.

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It was another security camera, this time inside of an operating room. There was a table, and on it there was the figure of a large pony under a sheet. Beside it was the doctor pony that I had killed. There was also the back of somepony’s head, probably the same pony from before. It was almost as if he knew where to stand to avoid being seen.

“Subject Six.” The doctor said with a grin on her face. “With this, we have done it. I told you we could, sir.”

“And you are positive she will live?” The other pony spoke.

“Yes, of course!” The doctor just beamed.

“And how will we set off the megaspell?”

“It’s a bit complicated, but.” She took out a remote-like device I swore I’d seen before. “We used a similar magical code, like the terminals in this facility use.” My stomach sank, because I realized where they were. The white hallways, the pony megaspells, everything. They were in the mountain facility. But how. “It’s been set up that when a chip in their brain receives the signal, it’ll start the detonation process.”

“And the detonation itself?”

“Well, for this subject we used a full sized megaspell, however we are confident with time our next subject will be able to be fused with a miniature one. Enough to cause a large explosion, but small enough the spread of radiation will be minimal and fade after a few months, just like you asked.”

“Excellent.” The pony sounded mildly pleased. “Are there any known side effects? It would be preferable that they never know of the change.”

“As far as we can tell subject six has no anomalies. The only thing is.” She lifted part of the sheet to show a metal leg, “We had to amputate the leg, and use the connection port in her shoulder to house the magical receiver. When magic is used around the subject they may feel a slight burning sensation around there. They most likely will think it is just a side effect to the cybernetics, but anypony without cybernetics...”

“I see.” The pony reached out a hoof to raise the pony's metal leg then let it drop. “Then we shall have to only perform the operation on ponies with cybernetics... a slight annoyance, but it'll be more than adequate.”

“Thank you, sir!”

“You have done very well... now, I need you to find a way for the subject to return to the wasteland.”

“What...” The doctor went wide eyed at the very thought. “B-but the subject—.”

“We need to test them under normal conditions. Make up an excuse for how she got where she is, I don't care how you do it. We can study her from a distance to make sure she can withstand the rigours of the wasteland without cracking or the project may yet fail.”

“But sir... I... I don't mean to contradict you. But we purchased her from the tribe north of Caledonia, under the understanding she was never to return, how will we—.”

“I don't care,” he said sharply. “Think of something.” The pony in charge walked off screen leaving the doctor alone.

...

Me.

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No pony spoke.

No pony breathed.

What could be said? What could be thought?

Serenity held up her gun in magic still, and I felt something in my shoulder.

It burned, and I finally understood.

Level Up!

Skill Note: Survival 90

New Perk: Unstoppable Force: Your martial might is truly legendary. You do a large amount of additional damage through enemy blocks with all Melee Weapons and Unarmed attacks. It's also useful for breaking down walls!

((A/N: Wow, so, that took a while. I apologize for the wait I had a few... issues with it. Firstly I had to scrap half a chapter when it wasn't working, then when I rewrote it it got accidentally deleted... fun stuff. But it's here now, Merry Christmas! Thanks to Kkat for creating this world that I abuse, and thanks to my editors for making this shit readable: theBSDude, Julep, and Menti!

Oh, and if you like your stories dictated not read, check out Equestrian Narrator's audio book version of Heroes! It's really good: <http://www.youtube.com/user/EquestriaNarrator/videos> ))