

## 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 make 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 a Enclave vertibuck appeared on the screen, ollowed by a Steel Ranger in full armour, and then the NCA Flag: a phoenix with it's wings spread in front of a five pointed star on a white field.f "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 image 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, Hire." "

"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 Walkirk.

"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 nopony 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 whirled 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 nopony 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, nopony 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."

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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 Walkirk. 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 Walkirk. 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 foalnapping 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.

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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~ ))

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