

Others

“Raiders can’t be reasoned or bargained with. And it ain’t no use surrendering, ‘cuz they’ll just shoot you anyway.”

The morning came without the familiar buzz of an alarm. Great, I had forgotten to set my pipbuck alarm again. I was probably late for my morning chores, and Chaplain Cross would grumble angrily in my direction. I rolled off my cot and onto the floor, stumbling over some heavy metal thing.

Wuh? Oh yeah. “Sorry about that, Bolt Action. Didn’t mean to wake you.”

A tin snore told me that I hadn’t.

I picked my way around her, and started to look for a place to relieve myself, but there didn’t seem to be any restrooms in the ‘Renegade’s Shack.’ Outside then.

I approached the door, intending to open it, but stopped at the muffled sound of voices from the other side. Other ponies! The prospect of meeting ponies from the surface was exciting, but I hesitated. What if it was the Overmare, or somepony else from Stable Seven here to execute the ‘traitor?’ I pressed my ear to the cold metal of the door.

“-lestia. Luna. Uh, the goddess? Fuck, are there any other ones? Princess Twilight, fuck, Princess Cadance? Fuckin’ pre-war shit tech.” A stallion’s annoyed voice came from the other side. Between my ears burning slightly from his poor vocabulary, and his not getting the answer right, I surmised that this stallion was not from Stable Seven.

Then another voice, “C’mon Rip, get the damn door already! Bet there’s Stampede, or Buck, or Dash in there! Prob’ly a whole hoard of it, place this well hidden!” The terms were unfamiliar to me, except for Buck, a quick-acting steroid. I wasn’t a doctor-pony, and I almost never got sick, so if the other two were medicines as well, I wouldn’t know. But if these ponies were looking for medicine, then they probably weren’t that bad.

A third voice murmured something staccato and indistinct.

Then some light taps came from the thick steel door, probably pounding hooves. Then Rip’s voice shouted again, “Goddess-dammed piece of shit trash! Fucking open already! ‘Say the name of your goddess’ my ass! I bet there isn’t even a real place, just some shitty marker some asshole left!” They knew about markers? Then they had a pipbuck! Maybe they hailed from some other stable. If that was the case, then maybe they had some survival tips. I definitely wanted to meet them, at least, and get an idea of how well stables had rebuilt Equestria after the mega-spell apocalypse. “I bet it’s nothin’. Fuckin’ false marker. Let’s go.”

The timing was too good, I couldn’t resist. I opened the door, to see three ponies, two stallions and one

very lean mare. They all wore some type of barding that seemed to be made primarily out of spikes and leather belts, but I didn't get much of a look at them before they all jumped around to face me. I opened my mouth to wish them all *good morning*, but the words died when the larger of the two male ponies brought up a sawed-off shotgun and pressed its jagged muzzle against my temple with enough force to earn it a little trickle of blood. I blinked out of surprise. "Gimme all your shit," he said. His voice, much clearer and nastier without four inches of steel and magical illusion between us, sounded like Rip's, and was only slightly distorted by the presence of a weapon in his mouth.

The firearm brought me to attention quickly. I blinked again slowly, taking in the situation with much greater detail, even flexing my temple and entering SATS for a moment. All three ponies were clearly outlined in hostile red. I started with the pony with a gun pressed to my head. The sawed-off shotgun was in extremely poor repair, better suited to the recycler than a gun closet. Some of the disrepair was purposeful, like the removed safety and the splintered remains of the stock and mouthpiece were, rather than repaired, simply covered with a softer, slightly fuzzy, brightly colored grip, attached primarily with dried blood, as far as I could tell. Goddess, was that *pony hide*? Rip himself was built larger than me, and he was far more muscular, which showed through his belts-and-spikes outfit that really didn't cover any vital areas, but both he and it were covered in grime, blood, and probably some other fluids to the point where it was hard to tell where his clothes ended and his hide began.

The other two ponies were similarly outfitted. The mare had, from the little I could see of it, a coat the color of tarnished silver that blended with her jaundiced eyes. Her mane, or scalp rather, had been scratched at so frequently and so vigorously that there were more scabs than hairs. Her forelegs were covered with red marks and scabs that looked like bite marks. Had she tried to eat herself?

The third pony looked like the smartest of the group, but that was probably the cracked dirty glasses and the pipbuck. I was more horrified and disconcerted by that pipbuck than the gun, because Glasses-stallion wasn't wearing it properly, instead he was holding it between his forehooves on the ground. The reason for this odd and less-effective ability was the real problem, instead of bothering to remove a pipbuck with a key, he had simply sawed it off of some other unfortunate stable dweller, leaving the putrefied limb still in the cuff. It was that pipbuck's map and radio they were listening to. I released SATS.

These were obviously not friendly ponies. I formed a quick half-plan to get rid of them.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I said, throwing a lazy eye over at Rip.

"The fuck shouldn't I?" came the reply. Good, keep him talking. If he's talking, then his tongue isn't poised to pull the trigger.

"A number of reasons. First, this spot's already been looted, and only I know where it's buried." I let that hang while I tried to think of more reasons, preferably true ones.

"Yeah, well maybe I don't care so much for your stuff as much as for making you dead."

"Rip, rip," rasped the jaundiced mare, "I wan' his face. I like it. 's pretty."

Rip seemed emboldened by her eccentric, unsettling comment. "You hear that? She wants your face. You'd better cough up quick. Boulder, go find what they're hiding in there."

Darn, that was one plan shot. Looking into Rip's eyes, I could tell that if I had simply told him that we didn't have anything, he would have shot me on the spot. Boulder, the glasses-and-pipbuck stallion, dropped the pipbuck and walked into the room, grumbling and cursing under his breath about having to do all the work. I for my part did my best to demonstrate an unflappability and confidence that I had never actually possessed, despite my mind working overtime to think of possible ways to diffuse the situation and get out unscathed.

"Rip! Rip, there's somethin' here!"

Rip's attention had shifted to the yellow mare, who had begun biting at her legs, but he refocused. "I knew it. You've been holding out on me, Pretty-Face." I guessed that was my new moniker. He then shouted past me, to Boulder, "What kinda shit did this asshole try to keep from us?"

"Iunno. Looks like – it's power armor!" Great, Boulder had found Bolt Action. I had hoped to keep her out of this.

"So that's what you are, Pretty-Face? You one'a them Steel Rangers?" Before I decided on an appropriate response, he withdrew the shotgun and then savagely jammed it under my jaw. "I hate Rangers. And it must be my lucky day, I caught you with your pants down. Any last words?"

I guessed that it was Rip's intention to cut off my last words with a well-timed round. Instead, I just laughed, in the process shaking the gun a little loose (Rip was taller than me, and the position was very difficult for him to maintain). "What's so funny?" he demanded, unbalanced.

"And I thought Glasses – Boulder – was supposed to be the smart one!"

They simply stared for a moment, and so I went on, "That's not my armor. It's mare's armor. And Earth-pony armor. That's my partner, still asleep. And let me tell you, she is not a morning-pony! But I bet a round of that shotgun in this little room will be enough to wake up anypony, even though it's too small of a weapon to do anything else to that armor. You wanna take your chances with one angry invulnerable mare, go ahead and shoot me."

"You're bluffing. Boulder, why don't you see if it fits on Sunshine." Boulder kicked at the armor's helmet, and jumped several hooves' distances when it stirred.

"Mnuh. That you Silver?" she muttered, twisting a bit. Then she leapt to her hooves. "Silver!"

"It's alright, Ms. Action, I was just explaining to this gentleman here why it's a much smarter idea to leave than to shoot me. Beneficial to all parties involved."

Unfortunately, Rip wasn't quite that easily intimidated. He tried to grapple me to get into a better position, but doing that trick again was just what I was expecting. As soon as he moved the gun again, I ducked, entered SATS and magically grabbed the shotgun in my telekinesis. I concentrated, putting all the small amount of force I could muster into jerking the shotgun out of his mouth. I ended SATS and thrust my head vertically upward, ending with the tip of my horn against the soft flesh where the taller pony's head met neck. "Leave." I growled.

It was a risky move, since unicorn horns, while incredibly sharp and durable, were also vulnerable. Taking any strong hit in the horn was worse than a shot to the groin. Worse, if it was shattered, it could potentially sever your connection to magic forever.

Rip's eyes darted around, looking from me, to Bolt Action with her rifle trained on him, to his two companions. Sunshine, the jaundiced mare, didn't seem to have taken any notice of us and seemed entirely consumed in trying to gnaw off her own forelegs. "Fuck. Fine." I backed off, and the three ponies left. Rip tried to get his shotgun, but I telekinetically threw it off the ledge rather than give him the advantage again.

I watched the trio trod out of the canyon up to the bridge, and disappear to the east.

As soon as they were out of sight, I nearly collapsed as the façade of confidence broke down in a rush of relief. No pony had had to die.

With the relief I felt came a laundry list of things my brain wanted to do. With the absence of mortal danger, I found that I still needed to relieve myself, and now I was hungry as well. I expediently took care of the first necessity, and then walked back into the safe house. Bolt Action had busied herself with the terminal. I half expected her to scold me, or give some sort of indication of her opinion on the morning's little event, but that inscrutable face granted no such knowledge.

I looked under the fold-out cot that I had spent the night in, where I had stored my pack between Bolt Action and the wall, but was greeted with only empty air. "Bolt Action, did you move my pack?"

"No." her voice was terse, annoyed. Maybe the terminal was being uncooperative.

I knew where I had placed my pack, and if Bolt Action hadn't moved it, then it must have walked off of its own accord or something. After all, no pony else had been back here, except for... Boulder.... I face-hoofed.

"That rotten thief!"

+ + +

We set off again, now with decidedly fewer resources. Bolt Action had insisted that I take half her rations, though now we had only one weapon, hers. I had gone and levitated back up the shotgun that I had thrown away, but that hardly counted as a weapon. In Stable Seven, it would have been trash. Even though I had only one round of buckshot in it, it might be useful as a club. I'd have to fire it from telekinesis, though, since I didn't trust it not to explode in my mouth. Besides, I didn't have a particular fondness for the taste of blood, pony-flesh, or Rip's saliva.

It was now mid-morning when we finally made it to the bridge that I had intended to reach yesterday afternoon. Finally reaching it, I was overwhelmed at the vastness of the equestrian landscape. I knew the Outside was supposed to be big, but this scale was more than I could properly comprehend. In every direction the ground stretched, mostly flat, sandy, and barren, with dead, petrified trees and bushes scattered across the landscape that didn't do anything to break up the overall monotony. There were only four major breaks in the landscape. To the distant northwest was a forest which was still green, though it was a dark, sickly green, and looking at it churned my stomach as much as the thought of firing Rip's

shotgun in earth-pony fashion, but for a reason I couldn't explain.

Some distant jagged shapes rose in the distance to the south. Mountains. Or were they hills? I wasn't sure quite where the distinction was between the two. The only other feature that broke the horizon was a number of black compression steel towers, whose peaks vanished into the clouds before reaching their tops.

The most important landmark, however, was the wood tie railroad that reached the horizon in two instances, one west, towards the forest, and one trailing southeast, towards the mountains. Faced with this seemingly immeasurable vastness, I fell back on my haunches. How could I hope to find the hidden bunkers of Steel Rangers in this wasteland?

I only had a vague knowledge of the overall shape of prewar Equestria. Living in the stable it had never been important to know, and stable ponies don't have a frame of reference to assign maps of the real world any more than the maps on the front inside covers of the Daring Do novels. This left the two of us blind in our choice of direction. Bolt Action wanted to stick to the railroad, because of a higher chance of finding civilization, if it existed. I wanted to go towards the east, after the thieves and my supplies.

Before we chose a direction, however, a distant, cheerful polka erupted on from the west side of the Ghastly Gorge bridge. It was patriotic, but too playful to really rouse any feelings of national pride, not that I had any. The melody was familiar, one I had heard often in the Stable Seven, though Stable-Tec's version was more solemn. Squinting towards the source of the music, I was horrified to see another bloatsprite, but worse: this one was covered in metal and lights.

Dear Celestia, a power-armored bloatsprite.

That settled the choice of direction rather quickly. Even if the EFS labeled it as non-hostile, I didn't want to take any chances, especially with a one-shot club. We began heading eastward, along the railroad ties. In retrospect, it was an obvious compromise, but the spritebot certainly sped up our decision-making.

The rails were in near-pristine condition, though they did not look like they were regularly maintained or used. More likely, they were sealed with powerful prewar magic, which fused the entire rail into a single rigid piece and simultaneously made it nearly invulnerable and self-repairing, much like the enchantments on power armor. The wooden ties, on the other hoof, were soggy, rotted things that disintegrated if you stepped on them. We soon learned only to trot along the side of the rails, where the ground was more stable.

The terrain was more hilly and rocky than it had initially looked from a distance. No matter what, the railroad seemed to take the path of least resistance, and for the most part stayed situated between varying stony brown hills on either side.

We walked on until the sky began to darken. I glanced at the time on my pipbuck. One o'clock? I had expected my books to not be right about everything, but I didn't think the days out here were so short. Perhaps, since Princesses Celestia and Luna were undoubtedly dead now (or else why would Celestia not have alerted her guards in Stable Seven?), the diurnal cycles had lost all regularity, throwing our sun and moon into chaotic flux?

It helped to think about such things while walking, taking my mind off the drudgery of just putting one hoof

in front of the other, or the flies and other small, annoying but not particularly dangerous creatures.

I was awakened from my internal theorizing by the sound of gunfire further down the tracks. It sounded like there was only one firearm, and not my little pistol from before. "Somepony else is in trouble!" I said, and took off towards the sound of the shot.

"Wait! Silver!" Bolt Action called after me, but I couldn't stop. If somepony was in trouble and I got there too late, I... I didn't know. I rounded a bend in the railroad and saw the source of the trouble. A lone stallion was charging full steam over one of the nearby hills, turning around every couple steps without stopping so that he could fire a semi-automatic rifle. It wasn't long before I saw what had him running for his life: a pack of giant pink butterflies crested the hill after him.

Butterflies? I thought they were supposed to be cute, small, and completely non-threatening! And insect wing power shouldn't be able to work on that scale, or so I thought from my education, which continually seemed less complete. The EFS definitely assumed them hostile. As I watched, catching my breath and coming up with a plan, they caught up to the stallion and swarmed him.

Bolt Action caught up. "Silver—"

I cut her off, jumping ahead again. I called the plan over my shoulder, "I'll distract them, you shoot it while I run. Try the wings!"

"Silver!" she shouted after me in alarm and anger, but this was an emergency! We'd address the problem later.

Wasting no time, I floated Rip's trash shotgun to point-blank range of the butterflies, and fired at the wings of one. It didn't tear up the insect's wings nearly as much as I had hoped, and instead of just getting one or two of them as I had intended, the whole pack turned in an instant. "Oh, sho--," I began, but better sense told me to forget the words and just run.

I had plenty of reason to expect this plan to work, I told myself as I ran. The stallion had been wasting time trying to shoot the butterflies, and was weighed down by his packs. Thanks to Rip and Boulder, I had no pack, and no weapon to distract me. I was also probably more fit than any random wasteland pony, judging by the ones I had already seen, due to proper diet and exercise as part of Stable Seven's daily military regimen. While a wasteland pony could probably take a hit better than me, I could probably run farther and had fewer permanent injuries. I could do this!

At least, that is what I told myself during those agonizing few minutes of otherwise blind panic. I'd never run so fast in my life. I dared not to look back at the dark blue carapaces and giant pink wings, but constantly I could hear the relentless flapping – the flapping! – of all those wings. Worse, the dark sky began to release a heavy torrent of water (rain?) that made finding my footing along the rocky hilltops an even more difficult endeavor.

For her part, and for all I could tell, Bolt Action performed admirably, exercising the quick and precise aim afforded her by a lifetime of firearm training and a SATS-capable suit. Still, she could not take them out fast enough for me. I ran for at least four minutes at full tilt. I didn't even know I could do that.

The flapping grew closer even as its frequency decreased, Bolt Action dropping most of them. Every so

often, a butterfly would break off from the swarm to harass her, but when that happened, I would levitate Rip's shotgun so that it interfered with their wings. That didn't turn the monstrous bugs on the gun, though, somehow they seemed to know that I was the source of the magical aura. Instead, the stray insect would begin heading right for me again.

I wondered how many butterflies were left? I turned my head just for a moment to look back and check. This was a mistake. There was only one, and that heavily wounded, but in the time it took to turn my head and look, I missed my next step, twisted my hoof on a rock, and stumbled, giving the butterfly all the time it needed to reach me. I felt a huge bite on my flank, and then heard it drop to the ground at last. I was still standing, and all the butterflies were dead. Ha!

I tried to raise a hoof and a victory smile to Bolt Action, but collapsed instead. My body tumbled down the hill, not coming to rest until I hit the gravel ballast of the railroad. I was now scraped and bruised badly, but that was nothing compared to the massive amount of pain that suddenly erupted from the open wound in my flank.

I felt fire erupt through my veins, rushing through my blood with every increasingly rapid heartbeat. Every cell seemed to feel its effects, even the tips of my eyelashes and hooves. I clenched my teeth together and hissed in pain, twisting to try to get up. I needed Antidote!

Bolt Action ran up to me. "Silver!" She said, her voice half worry, half anger.

I tried to form the necessary words, but my tongue seemed to be losing all its coherence quickly. "A...antidote. need. Ven...om." She fished out one of her three antidote cartridges. *Doctor Muffin Top's General Antidote*, it advertised, with the slogan "Widdul Guy not Feewing so good?" and a picture of a cartoon colt with his tongue sticking out and X's for eyes. I grabbed it with the little bit of telekinesis I could manage, and shoved it into my pipbuck's quick-med slot. Relief came as quickly as the pain had.

Bolt Action was saying something, but I couldn't really hear the words. Instead, I half-pushed, half-crawled my way towards the pony who had been attacked in the first place. I took out the mostly empty cartridge and injected it into one of his multitude of open wounds. "Bowl Ackshun, c'n I get a health poshun ober here?" I asked. My tongue was as numb as my ears from Antidote, so I indicated the pony with a forehoof. The stallion opened his eyes and pushed my hoof away.

"Save it." He murmured. My hearing was coming back.

Bolt Action agreed with him. "At the rate you get injured? I'm keeping all of these for you, Silver, for your own good."

I scowled, but the stallion shook his head. He was a middle-aged pony, tan and broadly built. He didn't have any of the symptoms of disease like Rip and his gang, but it was hard to tell thanks to the quantity of blood and dust that was now thick in the afternoon rain. His expression was contorted with pain, and he spoke slowly, with emphasis on enunciation. "Appreciate the offer though. Glad I could meet somepony better 'n raiders out here."

"Raiders?" I said, but he wasn't really in a condition to answer questions. "Bolt Action, you've gotta give it to him! He's dying!"

She stamped a hoof. "I do not! He's taken way more hits than you! I don't have that much Antidote left! And I'm not going to let you die later this afternoon just to prolong somepony's suffering on account of your conscience!"

"We have to do something, though!"

A trembling, weak tan hoof kicked me. "Told you to save it. Got mor'n poison wrong with my insides." I inflated a little, preparing to disagree, but he cut me off. "See you've got one of them fancy wrist-watches. Would you take a message and a package for me? It's important."

"Yes." I said.

Bolt Action, ever more practical, asked, "What message? What package? Where, and to who?"

"Take...take it to my son Honormark. In Tenpony. Jus' record my...final words. I'll give you the rest of my stuff, except give the package to Honormark."

I set my Pipbuck to record. "Okay. When you're ready."

The stallion shifted. "This message is intended for my sons, Honormark, Get Set, and Go, in Tenpony tower, by Red Day. Courtesy of... what's your name, son?"

"Silver Tongue."

"Courtesy of Silver Tongue. Seaspikes. My sons, if you're hearing this, then it means that the pony I gave it to has proven trustworthy. I've given him the package. Please reward him with one object of his choice from our collection. I died on the old Railroad between Froggy Bottom and Apploosa, to killerflies after being chased into the hills by some raiders."

So the deadly butterflies were called "Killerflies." And what were raiders? Some kind of mutant animal?

"I have not found Sundae yet, though I did recover the artifact, in the care of the pony bearing this message. My sons...I love you. You've always made me so proud, yes, even you, Get Set, you rascal. Live on for me. Know that wherever I go, I'll be watching you as long as you need me. And if Sundae's up there, I'm sure she's watching you too. I love you."

Red Day then pointed at a lump in his pack. I reached in and took it out. It was a perfectly smooth, ovular stone, dark green with light green spots. He pressed it into my hooves, then all his torso muscles relaxed, and his head flopped down in the mud. "That's the package. Can't believe I'm bein' saved by Rangers. Ironical. You can have all the stuff I've got on me, just see the package to Honormark. I mean it. Take it."

"Rangers? Steel Rangers? We're not- Do you know where we can find them?" He weakly shook his head. "Well, I'm surprised you're still talking. That venom shut me down almost instantly."

"Earth Ponies are more resilient than unicorns," Bolt Action murmured.

I waited for a response from Red Day. None ever came. None ever would come.

It's not that I had never seen death before. Ponies in Stable Seven were mortal just like anypony else. But for some reason the mental image I had was of a wizened old stallion in a casket, with a peaceful expression. The kind of thing at a Stable Seven funeral service, before the body was thrown into the general waste disposal unit and the casket put back into storage.

The image in front of me was not that, nor was it the dry and distant remains of the cave entrance in front of Stable Seven's door. This was grotesque. Red Day's tongue hung out of his mouth, not enough to be exaggerated like in foalhood comics, just enough to be disturbing and animal, especially when combined with his staring eyes. A stench began to emanate from him that was not merely body odor: his bowels had relaxed. Being poisoned to death by giant butterflies randomly out in the wilderness was not my idea of a noble death.

I closed those staring eyes and gingerly pushed the tongue back inside the mouth. We needed to bury him. Even if my pack hadn't been stolen, I wouldn't have had a copy of the prayers for the dead like the one Chaplain Cross kept in his office, but I knew them at least well enough that I could hold at least a small service. Even softened by the rain, the dusty ground was too hard to dig out, especially by hoof. Instead, I began levitating rocks around. We could at least build a semblance of a grave.

Rocks in horn, I turned back to the body that had been Red Day. To my shock, Bolt Action was stripping off the barding and packs from Red Day. "What are you doing?" I shouted, some sense of righteous indignation rising, although I didn't know quite why.

"What's it look like I'm doing?" she snapped back. "You weren't planning on wearing him for protection, were you?"

"But that's his stuff!"

"Weren't you listening? He gave it to you. It's yours now, and don't you complain, because you need it!"

But this – this felt like robbing the dead, even if Red Day had said I could take his stuff, that didn't mean we should! "Look, I know we're short on supplies right now, but do we have to take his barding? It didn't do him any good!"

She pointed a hoof at my injured rear end and his undamaged croupier, the hindquarters of his barding. Point taken. "If you're going to go using yourself as bait all the time, you have to wear barding!"

"I do not always use myself as bait!" I said, and mentally reviewed the past two days' events. "Okay, maybe I do, but still, it's robbing the dead!"

"It is not! He gave it to you! And even if it was, I'd still do it. You need the stuff, Silver, don't go turning away a goddess-send like this just because you think death is icky!" I dropped my rocks, turned around and began to walk away to get more, huffing as I did so, but Bolt Action wasn't nearly finished with me. "You're always doing this! You're always in trouble and I always –Always!— have to get you out!"

I returned with another load of rocks. "I do not. I can handle myself!"

Bolt Action had finished stripping Red Day's body. "You... handle... yourself... like a foal." she said, grunting as she began to move the rocks into place around the body. I inhaled to make an objection from

my hilltop location, but she cut me off. "You're not nearly as smart as you think you are, and you're half as charming. You wouldn't last six hours on your own."

"I could too. I have all the same survival training that you do. And I've gotten us past all the dangers so far."

"Training doesn't matter for marbles if you're going to open the door for any random pony. What was that this morning? Why was that door open?" She didn't wait for me to reply, but puffed out her chest, threw back her head, and began talking in an artificially deepened voice, "I know, 'I'm Silver, and I can handle any of these Outside ponies! I'll just charm them into taking me to their leader! We'll find the Rangers in no time!' Never mind that they have ponyhide clothes and are obviously dangerous criminals! 'It'll be a walk in the atrium, I shouldn't even wake up Bolt Action to ask her how to handle it. She's just my backup plan anyway!'"

"I think you're being a little unfair, there was no way I could have known they looked so dangerous." Confound that helmet, I couldn't read her face or emotions, filtered through an opaque mask and a tin voice. I had a pretty good idea, though.

"You don't have the guts to suck it up and just do what you need to do, you're just doing whatever you feel like and only respecting ponies when they agree with you, or strike you as interesting!"

That wasn't at all true. I had lots of respect, like for Smoothbore, or Chaplain Cross. Just not for ponies like the Overmare. And – "I have respect for you," I said. No wait, that was the wrong thing to say. That mask was really throwing me off!

Bolt Action snorted hard enough, I could swear I saw steam escape from her muzzle-plate. "Shut up. I don't want to hear any sweet talking out of you! I know you better than that!" I placed rocks one after another on top of and around Red Day's body. Bolt Action went to go get larger rocks, one at a time. "If you really respected me, you wouldn't be using me as a tool all the time, just because I'm stuck in this glorified tin can! You'd actually take the time to listen to me, before you run into a nest of trouble expecting me to pull you out!"

"Well I haven't heard you object to any of our plans so far. If you had a problem then you should have said something."

"I have – I am saying something! It's not my fault that anytime you know I'll have a problem with a plan, you're already halfway through with it before I can get a word off!"

I still wanted to disagree, but a little Silver, feeling very little indeed, told me that she was right. We'd finished the grave, or cairn rather, and Bolt Action held up the barding that Red Day had worn. "Alright," I assented, "I'll run my plans by you from now on."

"AND?"

"And I'll wait for you to give your two cents."

Bolt Action sniffed. "Alright. I suppose it'll have to do."

I took Red Day's barding from Bolt Action and put it on. It was of good construction, though it was a bit battle-damaged. Most of the mud and blood had washed away in the rain. It was dark blue with gold-trim, and consisted of enameled metal plates in most of the important areas, each backed with a pocket that was intended to hold a hard ballistic plate. About half of the major plates were shattered and the enamel was dented and chipped in places. It was held in place with some brass buttons, and trimmed around the collar with similar gold-colored piping that ended in "Absolutely Everything: Yes We Deliver!"

After I was finished, Bolt Action checked it over and said, "Fine. We still going the same way as before?"

"I thought you wanted to make the plans now," I said, but she shook her head, shedding water droplets. "No? Well now we have a location to get to. I just have no idea where Tenpony is. I don't even know the general area of Equestria it's in. But it's not like we have anywhere worth backtracking to." Still, without a clear long term goal, I decided to focus on the short term. "How about we get out of the rain?"

"I hadn't really noticed."

I threw a glare at Bolt Action. The rain struck against her armor, resounding with every drop. The armor had a built in magical repellant on the visor like it had on the mane crest and tail openings that not only offered additional protection, but also kept the visor dry. I on the other hoof was less immune to the rain's effects. My matted mane hung down in my eyes, trickling drops streamed down my muzzle, tickling my nostrils and making me snort. "Well, I want out of the rain. Let's go up to the ridge and try to find ourselves a shelter."

Bolt Action nodded, and I began to trek up the very ridge I had fallen down. Water flowed in a small stream down the path of my fall. It might have been a consequence of my sterile stable upbringing, or just the fact that my white coat stained easily and was hard to clean, but I turned out to be quite squeamish when it came to mud. I ended up trying my utmost to jump only from stone to stone, sometimes substituting a dead bush or two. For the most part, I was successful, but still I ended up with mud all up my cannons and hooves.

Once at the top, I again surveyed the expansive landscape. The canyon from which we had ascended was now out of sight, even though we had only been traveling for a few hours. My visibility now was less than it had been before, as sheets of blue grey water rolled across the landscape. Following the trail of the railroad, I eventually spotted an old station. I could barely see it through the wet haze, but the ancient wooden building did indeed seem to be more or less intact, at least on the outside. It wasn't large by any means. The two stories were closely built, and there was no platform for ponies to get off, just a rotted water tower and an empty box dug into the ground that had once held either wood or coal, just a little refuel and repair stop for trains. Anything more was obscured by the rain.

"We can wait in there," I said, indicating the two-story shack.

"Alright, but let's look at what all we got from Red Day before we do anything else."

"Sure. Right after we get out of the rain." I started to walk off, but Bolt Action had already begun rifling through the saddlebags. "What, now?"

"Yeah. Before we run into anymore trouble."

I didn't want to spend any longer being soaked than absolutely necessary, but my comfort was a poor argument, so I found another reason. "We probably don't want all that stuff to get wet. Might ruin it."

"Better we lose some equipment now than dying from something else just because we didn't know what we were carrying. But I see your point. Put up your directional shield while the pipbuck sorts it." I grimaced at the perfectly reasonable solution she had devised. My shield was for combat, not raindrops. Although considering my combat magic proficiency, maybe it was better suited to umbrella duty.

I focused my mind, putting a barrier above us, willing any raindrops to deflect themselves away from the saddlebags, and a convex blue transparent shell manifested overhead. Soon the patter of water on my back became a pins-and needles sensation in the back of my mind. My mane still dripped water in rivulets down my face, still tickling my nostrils, but at least I wasn't getting any wetter.

Bolt Action delved in and out of the bags for a while, eventually coming out with more ammunition for her rifle and a second earth pony rifle of the same caliber. It could have gone faster perhaps if I had sorted the bags with my telekinesis, but I wasn't one of those rare unicorn-savants who could maintain multiple spells at once. After we finished, we re-packed the bags and split the ammunition. I took the rifle, checking that it was in semi-auto mode, and holstered it. "Ready?" I asked Bolt Action. She kicked her reload lever and nodded.

I dropped the shield, and was rewarded with the sensation of a bucket of cold water being dumped on my head. The rain had definitely intensified. In irritation, I put the shield back up, set at an angle in front of us to counteract wind.

We walked towards the station in a meandering, zigzag path, as I went seeking the driest patches of ground and whatever shelter the occasional large rock or dead tree could afford. Consequently it took us much longer to get to the station than necessary. As we neared it, we were finally able to peer through the curtains of obscuring rain and see it in detail. "Eugh. Look!" Bolt Action indicated the billboard I had seen from afar, before the rain had intensified. Up close, we could see that whatever sign had been there originally had been covered by a splattered reddish-brown paint, and the centerpiece was the flayed and barely recognizable corpse of a mare. It wasn't an illustration of a corpse. It was a real one, strung up by improvised chains made from link fencing.

The sight made my insides squirm. The corpse had been mutilated in such a way that it was evident exactly how each injury had been made. Special attention had been made to destroy the most sensitive portions of her body, with the skin and flesh scraped down on the inside of every joint. On the outside of the joints, a nail had been driven into the caps, anywhere where there was a nerve. The entire abdomen looked like a vivisection half through, with the skin spread open. It looked like somepony had decided to connect her genitals to her rectum with a haphazard reciprocal saw.

I didn't have the experience or the training to venture a guess as to how old the corpse was, but it was probably fairly recent. If it hadn't been for the rain, I would probably have been able to smell its fetid stink as well.

A splattering of rain hit me, and I refocused my magic umbrella, which had faltered. I only had a hundred yards or so until we reached the building, and we could rest. Come on, Silver. Almost there. BANG!

A shattering pain rattled through my skull, the sensation of shattering a dozen dishes and then tallying

their pieces on a blackboard with my own horn. Red and green spots danced before my eyes as I shook myself. I knew the sensation, I knew what had happened. My shield had shattered. Why would it shatter?

My hearing and vision returned and I glanced around, gathering my wits. Bolt Action was crumpled in a pile of metal, water, and blood. And Blood! What -- How?

A gruff, shouting voice reached me through the rain, "Missed! You little shit unicorn with your fucking shield deflection! How d'ya like my anti-tank rifle, huh?" Now that I looked, squinting through the heavy rain, I could see a small pony on the balcony of the station.

Mystery solved. There was a nearby rocky outcropping where some larger rocks were exposed. I needed to get behind -- Bolt Action needed to get behind it. Before he fired again. I dashed over to Bolt Action and helped her to her hooves.

There was a half-inch hole clean through her front right elbow, and a much larger exit hole through her ribs. Blood was pouring over the metal faster than the enchanted steel could clean itself, but the armor was already repairing the hole.

We hobbled over to the outcropping with what seemed like agonizing slowness, but we did at least make the deadline. "Are you alright?" Stupid question.

I looked around the outcropping, careful to keep the rock between myself and the sniper pony. There was another red bar rushing out of the building, this one a light yellow, jaundiced mare clutching a long knife in what remained of her teeth. I recognized that mare. It was Sunshine, the crazy mare from this morning, loping haphazardly through the muddy field.

I ducked back behind the outcropping and considered my possibilities. Unless I was very mistaken, Sunshine wasn't planning on a civilized conversation over recycled hay fries. 'shoot her' was my first thought, but even as it crossed my mind I immediately rejected it.

Other options, then. I would have liked to talk her down, but the crazed mare was probably deaf to anything I could say. Maybe I could shoot to wound, taking her down non-lethally. That would be a great idea, if I could trust my aim that much, but I could not. There was a possibility of hoof-to-hoof combat, and trying to knock Sunshine unconscious. That seemed like the best nonlethal option, except for one thing: I sucked at hoof to hoof combat.

An irregular thudding rounded the side of the outcropping. There was no more time to think. My hesitation was forcing me into the last, least beneficial option. Sunshine charged at me, her knife jutting forwards as if to stab me. I smoothly sidestepped, and aimed a back leg at her shoulder, but my blow ended up being a light tap -- I had stepped too far, and was only within stage fighting distance. I didn't have enough time to recover before she charged me again, this time swinging the knife wildly. Some jagged tears -- the knife was too dull to really cut -- appeared in my haunch before I could roll out of her grasp.

A round exploded in the mud a yard away from my head, and I quickly thanked the Goddess that the weather was so poor. I jumped back up to my hooves and whirled to face the flurry of dull but savage cuts. I found it difficult to dodge her blade technique, or lack thereof, especially while trying to keep her between myself and the sniper. Still, injuries were limited to my forelegs rather than my torso, and none of them very deep. In a fury she made an ill-timed lunge, and I saw my opening to... what?

I had been so focused on defense, I hadn't given a thought to offense. Which, by the way, was usually what Smoothbore said when I lost sparring matches. And I really couldn't hurt this mare, could I? Even if I was philosophically and morally justified in killing her, some emotion within me immediately blocked out any of the numerous ways I could kill Sunshine. My hesitation spoiled the moment, and I ended up dodging around her back behind the outcropping.

She made another ill-timed, animal lunge at me again, but this time I was prepared. I quickly re-cast my shield spell, deflecting her just a little off-course. She swung wildly at me in passing, but I was ready, and instead took advantage of her throwing her all of her momentum in her head. Locking one forehoof over her shoulder and one crossed over her hooves, I pushed down with my own weight and pushed her into the mud.

Sunshine was so emaciated and weak that even my slim body had enough weight to keep her pinned. I kept her hooves pinned to the mud with each of my own. With her in such a vulnerable position, I realized that if I wanted to, I could easily kill her, but even though I had the ability, I still lacked the capacity. Without a next step in my plan, I simply held Sunshine there, her stunted, ragged breathing and futilely struggling scarred body still trying to kill me. My eyes locked with hers, and I "Peered" into her mind.

Sunshine wasn't like the ponies of stable seven. Her life, though I didn't know the details, was one of scarcity and want, of weakness and insecurity. Sunshine had only ever sought one thing, and that was stability. Lacking stability anywhere in life, she was overjoyed to find one thing in her life that consistently delivered. Even though it hurt, she still sought after it relentlessly. It was the one good in life, the only thing that could mitigate suffering. This one shred of stable consistency was the only thing of value, everything else was to be sacrificed, had been sacrificed until there was only a shred of the original pony left, and now it was the only thing one could cling to escape the horrors of what had been given up to it. We were the bottom of the ladder, below insects in dignity, sent to flush out the prey so that no pony else need bother. Even that had failed, and now the hunter was at the prey's mercy. There was only one way this situation could go, now that we were too weak to resist the heavy, haughty male crushing our legs beneath us. We had no options, and so we clenched our teeth together to ride out the nearing pain, biting deep into...knife! Yes, knife, remover of problems! Knife took away bad ponies, bad animals, and even bad shooting pains in the legs. We seized knife and jerked forward into that proud, unscarred face, intent on making sure he at least remembered us after he was finished.

But as soon as the plan began to form, I took away her knife with my blue magic.

We turned our head in shame. We had even lost knife. At least he was more handsome than the others. A hot tear welled up, but we fought it. Maybe we could reach knife, or bite him, or something.

I shook my head rapidly, and whispered emphatically, "No! I would never do that!" I could help! If stability was what she needed, then I could help. I could give her a foundation apart from whatever that object was that had ruined her life. Not that I had a plan yet, of course, but I was sure something could be arranged. "You don't have to be alone. We can—," but before I could finish, a hole entered through one of Sunshine's temples and exited around the opposite ear, and another head-splitting pain shot through my own skull, twice as bad as when my directional shield collapsed.

Blood ran out of the openings in Sunshine's skull, offsetting the yellow coat. Those jaundiced eyes that had been so full of meaning a moment before stared on dully past me.

After a short moment, I looked up at Bolt Action, who lay with a gun aimed directly at Sunshine's former body. A reproach arose inside me, but before I could put it into coherent speech, Bolt Action cut me off.

"Don't look at me like that! She was trying to kill you! It's not like you were going to do it, especially not when you're hypnotized or whatever she was doing."

"Hypnotized? Bolt Action, I was Peering!"

"Hey, blank stare, no blinking, not alert to the current emergency," she gestured, pointing to her opaque eye-plate, though her expression, like always, was unreadable behind it, "it looked like hypnosis to me! What the heck is Peering?"

"Y'know, the thing I used to do as a blank flank, where I could read someone really well and sorta become them. I just haven't done it in a while because I ran out of ponies inside Stable Seven."

"Uh huh. Right." She nodded a couple of times, slowly, then vigorously shook her head. "Nope, I don't follow."

"It's like I can understand a pony completely, put myself in their hooves, feel what they feel."

She stared at me for a moment. Or at least in my direction. "Could you Peer at me? Or into me, whatever."

I shook my head. "Nah. For one thing, I can't do it through the mask. I have to see their face. Also, I probably Peered into you when we were foals. I can't do it twice to the same individual, for some reason."

"So it's like a one-time mind reading. Why haven't you been using it?"

"Not quite as good as mind reading, I'm no mind-dominating unicorn. And I'm not supposed to just use it on ponies, that's what my m-, er, other ponies told me anyway." I changed the subject. "How are you healing up?"

"Not well. I can't really move, and the armor needs to lock down so that it can regenerate itself. There weren't enough healing charges in the armor to fix all my organs, and it'll be another half-hour before the armor's done fixing itself, too. But hey, if you keep on luring them back here, I can still shoot them."

She looked much worse than she sounded, lying askance in the muddy sand. "Hm. That won't solve our sniper problem unless he gets really stupid."

As much as I hated to admit it, there were no alternatives. If only I was smart enough, clever enough, then I could think of a way to get out of this situation without killing anypony.

There was one way I could get out alive without killing anypony. I could run away. Between my shield, the rain, and my speed, I could outrun the sniper. Running away seemed like a viable solution.

I almost did, too. But then my eye landed on Bolt Action, injured beyond the power of just one healing potion, all that was left of our supplies. Supplies that we would have had if Bolt Action hadn't been

covering for my recklessness. Supplies that she wouldn't have needed in the first place if she hadn't rushed in to save me from the Overmare's son.

I thought about the sniper again, and the mutilated corpse on the billboard. If I left Bolt Action here, then I was as good as killing her.

No, I couldn't run. And I didn't have the skills or the resources to get out of killing anypony in a confrontation and remain alive myself. There was only one more option I could think of, which was to wait behind this outcropping and hope the sniper got bored, and no pony else came behind here.

Just as I had settled on that last, desperate plan, a stallion sauntered around the rocks. "Hey Sunshine, aren'tcha done messing up those assholes? Don't tell me they had some Rage and you took it all yourself. Remember what the boss said: 'ya gotta share--'"

He cut off at the sight of a dead Sunshine and an only slightly scratched Silver. I gave one annoyed, tired glance at him, and slipped right into SATS before he could bring up his pistol.

I was out of options. There were no alternatives, and there was one thing that I was sure of: Silver couldn't solve this problem. Not the way I was.

I reached deep within myself, and found the feeling that refused to allow me to kill anypony. I quarantined it, shut it off.

It was as easy as flicking a switch.

My objective was to kill every hostile pony in the facility, most importantly the pony with the anti-materiel rifle. Immediately, however, I needed to eliminate this red bar on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. Simple enough.

Still in SATS, I brought out Red Day's rifle, switched it to three round bursts, loaded it, and aimed it at the hostile red bar. SATS ended, and I fired three slugs into the center of his chest. Its pistol was barely out of its holster. That was simple. Why had it been so difficult before?

I stepped towards his body, levitating his firearm and visible ammunition into my own holster, in case I ran out of Red Day's ammo. I then backed up to one end of the outcropping, and flicked my long tail into the sniper's range. He didn't shoot, which meant either that he was smart and waiting for me to come out fully, or that he was bored and wasn't paying attention. Either way was fine for me. I flicked it again, and then sprinted – but remembered that I had a promise to keep to Bolt Action.

"I am going to enter the station and eliminate every hostile." I said to Bolt Action. "Will return if successful, with medical supplies if possible, should there be any inside." My companion said something that was incredulous and indicated that she understood.

For the third time, I flicked my tail, and then sprinted to the other side of the outcropping, no hesitation. Unless I was very unlucky, he would be surprised enough by my change in position to not hit me the moment I left cover. I ran at full tilt towards the station, and after five galloping steps I slipped back into SATS to check on Sniper.

As expected. I slipped back out of the trance and leapt to the left just as an anti-materiel round whizzed through the space I would have occupied. We repeated the deadly choreography twice more at varying intervals and directions. There was shouting on his side, I may have frustrated him. Good.

The immediate doorway was both ajar and clear. I crept in noiselessly, tapping my hooves down roundly from point to heel as I sidestepped out of the doorway and into shadow.

My eyes took a moment to adjust, but nopony was guarding the entrance to take advantage of my necessary hesitation. The guard's pistol was probably in my holster now.

Clutching the holster in my teeth, I crept up to a nearby doorway. The Pipbuck's EFS told me there were three hostile marks inside.

I spat out the rifle and gripped it in telekinesis instead. The rifle slowly floated over the doorway and around to the other side. Clutching the pistol in my mouth, I nonchalantly sidestepped into the doorway and slipped back into SATS. Two of the red bars on my compass were stallions. I shot both of them with the rifle before they could react to my presence, but the third mark was trickier.

It was a smaller, pawed and furry animal with a mouthful of teeth. It was similar to my textbook pictures of animals called "dogs," but it was ragged and mangy, completely different from the groomed cartoon animals I knew. It also wasted no time in lunging at me, all teeth and snarl. SATS had run out of charge. I backpedaled back out the doorway and levitated the rifle back with me, so that the instant the "dog" bounded through, a trio of bullets pierced its head and it collapsed with a whimper.

There was no way the shack would be unalerted after the sound of the rifle. I stepped over the corpse of the dog and magically gathered the ammunition from the two corpses inside the room. The rounds they carried were either 9 or 10mm pistol rounds, and none for my assault rifle. I only had one more clip after this one ran out, and the pistols were not in nearly as good condition as Red Day had kept his rifles.

I holstered the pistol and put Red Day's rifle bit back in my mouth.

The room appeared to be some sort of kitchen, and closed shutters showed a register and bar intended for pre-war guests. There were some locked safes and some boxes of pre-war food in an adjoined office.

Shouting echoed in the hall behind me, along with corresponding red bars on my EFS. These ponies were clever enough to stop at the door, waiting to blast my head off if I ever decided to leave by the only exit.

I was a cleverer pony, though. After making a noisy show of prancing around the room, I hid behind a food preparation counter. I clacked the rifle against my pipbuck to approximate the sound of reloading.

The red bars took the bait, and two rushed in to capitalize on my 'misfortune.' A husky male voice called out a vague but emotion-filled threat of some sort. They rounded the counter at full tilt, clutching a tire iron and a metal pipe, both of which proved inferior to double trios from Red Day's SATS-assisted rifle. My hooves danced a bit more, imitating a scuffle, intending to lure the hesitating third bar.

No luck. The red bar stayed firmly planted by the doorway, no doubt ready to blast off the head of anypony who walked out of the room. It was being very quiet, too. Smart. If I didn't have my pipbuck on, it

might have killed me, too.

Sidling up to the opposite side of the dry, rotten wood wall, I prepared a test for the red bar. The crowbar of one of the former red bars lifted itself out of its now slack mouth and flung itself out of the room at a quarry eel pace. A satisfying and informative BANG! arose from the other side of the wall, from the floor's height. Ah. Prone. I see.

The crowbar was followed by Red Day's rifle, aimed at the same elevation and direction as Red Bar's shot. A voice hissed a vulgar exclamation before I mentally squeezed the trigger. This was almost too easy.

The red bar disappeared from the blue EFS compass, and I stepped in through the doorway. The late Red Bar had another sawed-off shotgun, and after searching it's body, I found five unspent shells, and a necklace made from dried pony tongues, many with bites taken out of them.

There was nopony else inside the station, though I had yet to run into Mr. Anti-materiel rifle. The station had, besides the snack bar, a ticket and mail window with some locked safes and some old, torn propaganda posters covered with graffiti. There was a restroom that still had functional faucets and a locked first-aid box. Eventually I found stairs leading to the second level. Clutching the rifle in my teeth, I crept up the dark spiral stair, and opened the half-hinged door to a scene that likely would have made anypony retch.

It appeared to be some sort of dormitory or other group living space, but it had been converted into a very unsanitary torture space. Likely the mutilated body outside had been carved up on one of these tables. But that wasn't important.

What was important was that there was a blue non-hostile bar and a red one holding by fuchsia magic the very large anti-materiel rifle to the blue bar's head. A hostage situation. Hm.

It was equally important that there was a tripwire inches from the door. The red bar said something that was probably a twisted invitation, judging by the grin on red bar's face. That grin disappeared when I stepped over the trip wire.

Red Bar changed his tune then, probably bargaining. If Red Bar wanted to bargain, he was too late. That Silver was gone. Besides, I couldn't even understand the words. I simply stood there, calculating. The words weren't important.

It was important that Red Bar was a unicorn, and so could trip the wire behind me by telekinesis. I countered that strategy by putting my own telekinetic sheath over the trigger, immobilizing it. As a further countermeasure, i put up my shield behind me in case any other tricks were planned. It was what I would do in a situation like Red Bar's.

Red Bar's darting, envious eyes told me that he had not thought to do those things. More's the pity, then. Red Bar's mouth kept on working, making sounds that were probably speech.

The most important fact of all, of course, was that the time it would take for my rifle to fire, added to the time it would take bullet to travel the short distance and hit its mark was less than the reaction time of a pony. Still, it would be best to take Red Bar off-guard. Though it strained my magic and made my shield

as strong as wet paper, I telekinetically took the rifle out of my mouth, keeping its barrel at the same angle. Then I opened my mouth to speak, and fired.

Objective complete, all red bars eliminated. Now what? Looting, perhaps. Maybe there was something in the first-aid box for blue bar here. Or Bolt Action.

I deliberated on my next objective, but before I set my course, I noticed a little nagging sensation within me. It wasn't a new sensation, but while I was in immediate danger it had ranked low on my priorities. Like a constant knocking on the door of a janitor's closet. I opened the metaphorical door, and flicked on the switch--

Cold. Wet. Dark. The floor was covered in blood, most old but some new. The room was strewn about with strips of ponyflesh. On one of the beds was an emaciated body that seemed to have survived multiple exploratory dissections by dull knives. It still breathed, somehow.

Goddess, what had I done? I had killed other ponies! And it was easy! Mares and Stallions- no foals, fortunately, but if there had been a hostile filly or colt, I would have killed them too without hesitation. I hadn't even given those ponies chances to surrender, even though the last one had even tried to bargain.

I was disgusted with myself, but there was no time. Bolt Action was still out there, wounded, and I needed to help her. I put away my thoughts and feelings until after the immediate danger was over.

It was easy to disarm the hastily-assembled grenade trip-wire, and I rushed down the stairs. The station was like those propaganda films I used to watch, where some invisible zebra killer would materialize out of the darkness and kill everypony one by one. Only all the ponies had been killed by me, not some monstrous zebra caricature. I stepped over the dead body of a mare whose eyes had been shot through. Her hair was held in a ridiculous style by some bobby pins, which I removed. I had read about ponies like Daring Do picking locks with bobby pins, in fact I knew more about bobby pins in conjunction with lockpicking than about any other purpose they might serve. I didn't have a screwdriver, but I did have Sunshine's dull knife. It should work just as well.

I went into the restroom, determined to pick the lock of the first aid kit. How did they do it in all those books and pip-boy serials? I had no idea where to start, but fortunately the pipbuck had a short basic tutorial. It was intended for a dedicated lockpick and torsion wrench, but maybe my bobby pins and small dull knife would do the trick anyway. I focused on the lock, ignoring the soft patter of rain on the roof and the periodic creaking of the ancient structure. Following the tutorial by the letter, I began by putting the knife in and applying pressure. Then, feeling around for the tumblers, I prepared to -click-. The Ministry of peace box opened up immediately with no effort. Perhaps the lock was only intended to keep out foals, teens, and now bandits, rather than obstruct any urgent medical care.

Inside the Ministry of Peace box was a pair of healing potions, some shots of Med-X painkillers, some bandages, scissors, and duct tape, as well as an instructional leaflet complete with illustrated examples of right and wrong treatment performed by a butter yellow pegasus with a pink mane on a phoenix. The yellow reminded me of Sunshine, and I threw away the leaflet in shame and disgust.

Focus Silver, Bolt Action needs you.

I advanced slowly, stepping over corpses that I could not bear to look at, even in the near-darkness of the

station hallway. Once out of the door, the soft patter of rain transferred from a distant rhythmic sound to an immediate physical sensation. I walked around the muddy, puddle-filled craters where Rip's shots had landed.

Bolt Action had left the cover of the rocks and was struggling to crawl through the mud. Judging from the track, she had dragged herself a third of the distance between the outcropping and the train station, digging at the soft ground with the armor. Seeing me alive and relatively unharmed, she flopped down and stopped struggling. I galloped to her.

"Hold still, I need to get these into the right slots." I said, telekinetically flipping open the cover to the armor's auto-doc refill center. "You should've stayed in cover, what if that sniper was still targeting you?"

"Everything...quiet. Thought you were...if so, I'd be dead either..." she cut off as the suit's auto-doc sent the first potion directly to her mouth through a vein in the undermesh. I pulled off the cork of the second one and poured it carefully into the reservoir. It didn't immediately drain the whole potion, which was a good sign. "Did you...?"

I made no direct answer. Don't think about that now. Med-X, put the Med-X in the auto-doc. The slots for Med-X were conveniently labeled, and I placed both syringes in their corresponding slots, though neither fired.

In a matter of minutes, Bolt Action was on her feet again, good as new. We started walking towards the now-quiet station in equal silence. On arriving at the door, Bolt Action tried to break the awkward tension that always forms when ponies are together and quiet. "I'm surprised you managed to stop that sniper. What did you end up doing, reading him Equinas until he fell asle...oh." She stopped when her suit adjusted itself to the darker corridor and she saw more clearly the carnage I had wrought. Yeah, I didn't really have any words, either.

"We should search the building for anything useful. Maybe we can even find the stuff they stole this morning. I'll do top if you'll do bottom." There were fewer bodies on the second floor; I wouldn't have to stare my actions in the face as much.

She nodded, and I walked upstairs reveling in the near silence. I felt like I could hear every raindrop on the roof, and every breath of wind. Wait a minute, that wasn't wind breathing. It was a pony. The blue-bar pony that the unicorn was holding hostage! My mental tunnel vision could be a real problem sometimes. I rushed over the body of sniper-pony to the mutilated mare, who was looking at me with wary eyes.

"It's okay, I'm not here to hurt anypony. Especially you, you look like you've been through a lot, though we don't really have medical supplies to spare." I said. My eyes darted around, looking for clues. Nearby were a few tools, mostly kitchen implements, covered in gore. The most heavily abused tool was a long, thin flat cheese grater, and my eyes involuntarily crawled to her destroyed 'equipment' and I shuddered. With a cheese grater!

Her voice was weak, tired, but full of hurt and fury. "What the hell did you do to my husband?" she gasped.

I looked down in surprise at the body below me. "That was your husband? But he was holding a gun to your head!" What kind of a deranged pony could do that to his wife, or to anypony?

"Not the raider. Your armor. It belonged to a pony named Red Day, didn't it? Killed him and now you're going to finish the job." She turned her head, giving me an incriminating glance which made my insides squirm both from the intent and from how much physical and emotional damage was evident in her face. I avoided her eyes, though. I didn't think I could handle Peering at her.

"I'm not a killer." I said, then immediately backtracked. "Well, I am now, but I wasn't before just now. And I was doing my best not to fight them, until..."

"Hmph. Not...not what I saw. Most ruthless eyes... ever seen. Didn't even register that...even existed. If...had the strength, 'd kill you right now. If...is true, and I don't believe it, you're... most dangerous thing to happen to the wasteland."

Hey, wait a minute. I had just saved this mare, and avenged her abusers! She should be thanking me for a job well done, not lecturing me! Feeling quite a bit put out, I unrolled the bandages that were in the First Aid box. They weren't much, but maybe the thin coating of regenerative salve on the inside would help this mare survive long enough to get to whatever passed for proper doctors out here.

"S-save it. You ain't seen what they done to my insides. Now that nopony's stabbing me with stims every ten minutes, I can actually die. And I ain't accepting help from nopony who murdered my Red Day."

"I did not kill him! He died from Killerfly stings! I can prove it, too, I have his last words last words and everything!" I navigated on my Pipbuck and set it to play on external speakers, and Red Day's voice crackled to life.

"This message is intended for my sons, Honormark, Get Set, and Go, in Tenpony tower, by Red Day. Courtesy of... what's your name, son? ("Silver Tongue.") Courtesy of Silver Tongue. Seaspikes. My sons, if you're hearing this, then it means that the pony I gave it to has proven trustworthy. I've given him the package. Please reward..."

She reached over and slapped the pipbuck, and the message cut out. "Don't... don't wanna be one-upped in dyin'. I'll see him soon enough."

"I suppose so." My indignation was rapidly disappearing. "So you're Sundae."

"Hey, Silver!" came the voice of Bolt Action, from down the stairs. The cheerful note of her voice was dissonant with the corpse next to me. Heavy thumping came as she came up the stairs. "You'll never guess what I found in the back room. Your bag! Hah! Turns out these ponies were the same ones that robbed us this morning! I mean, sure, the food's gone and the medicine, but at least you got the bag! Justice in the wasteland!"

She poked her metal head around the door frame, noting the scene without visibly reacting.

"Justice? I didn't administer any justice to these ponies."

"Course you did. Who do you think killed all these mares? And lots of other evil stuff, too, I bet." She waved a hoof. "Silver Tongue, deliverer of heavenly justice to evildoers."

Bolt Action's inexplicable good mood wasn't infectious. While I did like the thought of being some kind of

comic book hero, what I had done was not anything nearly as grand. I had --

"Hey, if you're going to sit there and mope or whatever, go downstairs and try picking the locks on those mailroom lockers. I was going to try, but the helmet and hoofguards kinda preclude fine tool manipulation. Meanwhile I'll collect what I can up here." She quickly scanned the room. "What were you doing all this time, anyway? All the stuff is still out."

I nodded my head in the direction of the corpse. "Paying attention to Sundae's last words." At a blank look (I still couldn't read her expression through the helmet), I clarified. "Y'know, Red Day's wife."

"Hm. That's sad I guess. But it doesn't really help us now, does it?"

There was just no spoiling Bolt Action's mood. I shook my head with a small smile at her cheerful pragmatism. Maybe it was infectious.

Some of the mailboxes downstairs proved too difficult to open, but I got several of them. Most were disappointingly empty, but one contained some outdated firearm periodicals that Bolt Action might enjoy reading. I was surprised that they still were readable, pristine even.

The time spent lockpicking forced me to focus on the task at hand, my senses alert for the faint clicking of the tumblers, and my mind focusing on the delicate telekinetic movements of both the knife and the bobby pins. Maybe I would get really lucky and find an actual lockpick kit.

The activity of lockpicking took a lot more time to accomplish than I had been led to believe from my cheap escapist stable fiction. I had gone into it with the completely unreasonable expectation of finishing within a few minutes. Instead, it took a couple hours, most of which was taken up by a determined effort to ignore Bolt Action flipping through the pages of the ancient magazines. Finally, I gave up on the last few locks. They were too difficult for my novice lockpick skill.

Bolt Action had taken up residence on the covered platform of the rail station. The tin roof still echoed a quiet drumroll, punctuated by an occasional percussive thunderbolt. She was curled up, her armor forming a barrier between the ancient pages of firearm filly and the rain. I flopped down heavily and almost baited conversation with a loud sigh, but caught myself and tried to cut it off halfway, a tactic that left me coughing in spasms for several seconds. Bolt Action ignored me and my fit altogether.

Footnote: Level Up

New Perk: Telekinetic Precision – You have a steady horn on your head for when you need to count sand, thread a needle, or keep a pin in a grenade.