

*"Dying for something is easy. It's living for it that's tough."*

I saw stars. The world flashed bright in my eyes and the sharp pain rattled around in my head. Two-Shot landed on all fours in front of me and began to circle again. I followed in step, snorting a rivulet of warm blood back into my nose. He took the step, came in and reared up. Clang went his hoof off the brim of my hardhat. The hunk of yellow metal tumbled to the sand. I looked to the hat, then back to Two-Shot. He stumbled to his right, balance thrown off by a mixture of poor landing and his fading high. I spun, bucked, sent the smaller unicorn rolling in the dirt.

Two-Shot came back with fury restored. He leapt through the air, a flash of white light surrounding him. I turned to take the brunt of the telekinetic cannonball with my side instead of my face. It was my turn to taste the sand. I may have been bowled over, but I was unhurt and swiftly back on my hooves. We locked eyes, watching each other for the faintest telegraph, the slightest twitch of muscle, to see who would break first.

The hazy white barrier surrounding Two-Shot dropped. He charged me. I waiting, counted time, and rose when he closed in. My hoof came down, striking him above the eye. He crashed to the ground beneath me. I quickly pranced away. Even if he was knocked for a loop, I was not about to expose my underside to him. Putting distance between us, I looked back to his prone form in the sand. Again, I snorted the trickle of blood back into my nostrils.

As Two-Shot picked himself up from the ground; I saw a line of red above his eye mingling with the white of his coat. Blood from the fresh gash began to flow down into his right eye. He looked down to wipe the blood from his eye, matting his mane down and turning his bright hair dark. Blinking back at me, he gritted his teeth and growled. "You should've gone for her."

"There was nothing I could-," Taking a hoof to the jaw cut off my words. It served me right for taking my eyes off the unicorn, but I couldn't look him in the eye with him like he was. The iron tang of blood hit my tongue. I spat on the ground and used my tongue to take stock of all my teeth. A second kick struck hard against my barding. I wheezed, and wheeled around. My kick found purchase just under Two-Shot's chin. He was angry, fueled by grief and pain, but I was still a lot bigger and stronger. I made him soar.

Two-Shot lay unmoving. I circled around him. "You done yet?" I asked through heavy breaths.

The white unicorn stirred. He managed to get back on his hooves, his right eye shut, blinded by the dirty gash above it. A white glow surrounded his horn. With whip crack speed, the light shrouded his revolver and drew it. "No," he told me.

Time stopped. We stopped. I looked at him and he at me. He shared his pain by making me feel it. He expunged his by feeling pain himself. We both knew this, even if unspoken. We were not fighting each other. We were fighting ourselves through most convenient proxy. We left our blood in the sand, and with each drop that soaked into the ground, we distanced ourselves from the pain.

The revolver hit the sand. "Was getting in my way," Two-Shot said, swallowing. He panted and grinned, his teeth stained red. I mirrored the gesture and gave him a nod.

He charged. I received. We hit the ground together. His hoof pushed against my neck. His good eye wide as tears from his bad eye mixed with the free flowing blood. I looked up at him, up at the pained grimace

he had on his face while he choked me. Then I spat in his good eye. Two-Shot was off me and I was on him just as fast. I barreled into the sniper with my shoulder held low. He went up and I bucked him into the air. He landed with a heavy thud, kicking sand into the air.

I looked down at him. "Let's go, little pony. Don't get tired now. I can beat your flank all night."

The half-blind, bloodied, tired and emotionally spent pony at my hooves looked up at me and once more grinned a bloody grin. "Counting on it," he said, and took the fight to me.

For a long time we traded blows on the sand. Kicks, forehoof strikes, tosses, we spent our time tearing at each other to get to ourselves. We didn't fight, you couldn't call what we did fighting. It was nothing so well thought as that. We simply spent ourselves. Simple raging as the light dimmed and the glow of a distant fire danced in the sundered Manehattan skyline.

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I sat in the sand while blood trickled from my nose in a tired, half-dried line. My head throbbed; it felt stuffed with cotton that was trying to explode. In front of me was water. Water as far as my eyes could see, for what they could see. Far out into the horizon, the inky black clouds met with the inky black water to create the velvet emptiness before me.

Behind me crackled a fire. Its light danced on the sands, creating long twisting shadows on the ground. I pushed some sand around to watch the changing of the patterns. It made me smile to watch as the tiny dunes and ripples I made contorted and warped the shadows. Simple things can still amuse.

I looked back to the makeshift camp. Two-Shot lay near the fire, finally at rest near the warmth of the flames. Bandages patched up the cut I opened above his eye. A Med-X syringe lay in the sand beside. The little helper got him off to sleep after our little bout with catharsis. Watching him rest, I was reminded just how small he was. He had a lot of strength in him, I couldn't argue with that. I didn't know whether to credit the drugs he sucked down like candy or his own hatred. In the end, I settled on just figuring it was just to make up for his size. The thought brought a coughing laugh from my chest, it made me wince, but it felt good.

Across from the fire, Daisy slept. She had been out of it since we left Manehattan. When we started our escape, we talked to one another. Nothing more was said than just assuring each other she was alive and going to make it, but it was comforting to hear her voice. She had stopped talking sometime before we stopped on the beach where we made camp. In her efforts to be the front line, she took a lot worse than any of us still alive. We spent most of what remnant medical supplies we had trying to help her as much as we could. In the end, however, we just had to let time be the decider of the mare's health.

Fizzy was still awake. She sat by Daisy, keeping watch over her. Without Cherry, Fizzy stepped in to do what she could medically. It wasn't much, but her help was invaluable. Two-Shot was in no state to help by the time we got to camp, and I was too busy dealing with the unicorn to put in my helping hoof. The mare was a trooper, though. She didn't interfere with our fight, just kept at helping Daisy, doing what she needed to. I wanted to thank her for that, but I couldn't think of an angle where it didn't sound worse than the silent acceptance.

White sands stretched to the lapping waters of the ocean. From my spot, I could see the long curve the

beach made around the water. An empty dock, a devastated foundation, and a scattering of skeletons were the only signs of the ponies that came before the war. We managed to use some of the wood from the building to make our fire, including the sign that dubbed this place the Horseshoe Bay Beach Club. It meant nothing to me, but Fizzy marked the location down on her map and told me we were on the right track.

It was sometime after that, when Two-Shot finally came down from his high enough to realize that Cherry was not actually with us. He did not take the news well.

So now, I sat on the quiet beach, bleeding and ruminating. I looked back to the Manehattan skyline. I could swear the fire at the Hotel Haflinger still burned on. I could feel the flames, see the billowing smoke, and hear the crumbling death throes of the building. All of it lived in my imagination, but that was real enough as I looked at the dead city. Good riddance and I hoped Scorched Earth went down with Cherry. He deserved as much.

"Is there something wrong?"

Fizzy stepped toward me. Backlit by the fire, she was lost in shadow. I gave her a half-hearted smile and wiped the dried blood from my nose. All it served was to start the blood trickling fresh. For some reason, the futility of the gesture made me laugh.

"Um, I'll take that as a yes?" Fizzy asked. She stepped closer, and the mixture of confusion and concern evident in her awkward smile of uncertainty became clear in the low light.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and the sudden fit of laughter. "I'm as good as I'm going to get right now, Fizzy. For whatever measure that's worth." I snorted the blood back into my nose on reflex. "Have you seen my hat?"

As though on cue, my hardhat floated back onto my head. "That was incredibly stupid, you know," Fizzy chastised me, ramming my hat down to make her point abundantly clear. "We do not have enough medical supplies as it is, nor are we capable of fully utilizing what we do have. How could you think brawling with Two-Shot would be productive in the least?"

"It isn't. It wasn't. It was stupid and I know that Fizzy," I tried to explain my place through the muss of my beating muddled brain. Explaining the nuances of the why was an impossible task. That did not mean I would not attempt it. "He needed an outlet. We don't exactly have Scorched Earth around here to take revenge on, and I was the only pony that could have done something to help Cherry. I was a good target. And truth is I knew I could take him."

"I was there, too."

"You were busted up and mumbling incoherently on my back."

"I was trying to tell you I could walk."

"You also said you wanted a rocket launcher."

"I do! Now stop trying to change the point!"

I grinned at Fizzy's annoyance. Like I said, simple things amuse me. "Alright, alright, I know what you mean. There was nothing I could have done. I know that."

Fizzy frowned and shook her head with the mild condescending disdain of the skeptic. "So why did you fight then? Was it because you slept with her? Did you have feelings?"

"I'd like to say I felt for her," I began to put the truth out there with a half-hearted shrug. "I didn't, but she didn't feel anything for me, either. A night, that was all. It was something that both of us needed."

The unicorn looked at me, her face scrunched in thought, skeptical squinting as though she sought secrets in my words. "I don't know. I just don't get it," she waved a hoof in dismissal.

This was new, and surprisingly intriguing, or intriguingly surprising, either or. "You don't get what?" I poked my nose into the statement with an eager little grin.

Fizzy took on a stony countenance. "How you could have, you know, done that with her. You didn't even know her. I thought ponies were supposed to before that kind of thing."

I couldn't keep the chuckle down, but it at least bought me a moment to think about how to go about explaining. Laughing at her also bought sharp indignation from Fizzy, but that just made me laugh more. Terrible cycle, that.

"Take a look at them," I told Fizzy, pointing a hoof over toward Two-Shot and Daisy, still listless and sleeping in the sand, "They loved Cherry, but they're in love with each other. There's a big difference. She may have wrapped it up in trying to help me, but in the end, I think she was looking to get something she needed and wasn't getting."

Fizzy looked at the pair with a thoughtful eye. Her mouth quirked into a frown and she adjusted her glasses. "I suppose I didn't think of it in that way. It may be hard to tell," she bit her lip and looked at the sand, drawing a circle with her hoof, "But I never really have thought much of sex or things like that."

"Really? Never would have guessed."

My sarcasm went undetected. "I just never focused on it. I had too many other things interesting me. So I never thought or cared about it much. Doesn't make me weird, does it?"

I looked to my side. Fizzy looked back at me with wide, questioning eyes. I snorted back a laugh. "Nope." I shook my head and looked back to the fire. "There are plenty of other things that make you weird, and a little terrifying."

"I'm not terrifying. How am I terrifying?" came Fizzy's indignant protest.

"Your tendency to solve problems via high explosives, maybe," I pointed out with a little tap of my hoof on her saddlebag. "You probably slept with a grenade as a filly is one."

"It was deactivated."

We looked at each other for a moment. I tried to look for a sign of a lie, a joke, anything in Fizzy's face that told me she wasn't being honest. I found nothing but earnest and unvarnished truth there. I settled on relying upon my eloquence. "Really now?"

Fizzy nodded and attempted to shrug off my reaction with a look away. "I picked one up as a filly and wouldn't let it go for some reason," she explained, watching the slow lapping of the dark waves. "My father wrenched it from me long enough to disarm it so I could take it around without detonating."

My jaw touched ground. "You really did carry a grenade around as a filly. Not a toy car or even one of those Smartypants dolls. A grenade. Wow."

I couldn't help but notice the suddenly very sheepish look that settled about Fizzy. She continued to deflect, taking sudden interest in the grains of sand, the wrecked Beach House, and the fire. I knew that look, and it made me smile wickedly.

"You still have it, don't you?" I poked her saddlebag again.

Fizzy's horn glowed faintly and out floated a grenade. It looked like any other grenade I had ever seen, other than the fact it was painted black. She held it in the air in front of me, letting the grenade slowly spin.

"You painted a face on it?" I rolled on the ground, laughing uproariously, my legs wheeling in the air. "You painted a happy face on a grenade."

The grenade shot back toward Fizzy and she held it protectively against herself. "Of course Mister Boom would be happy. He's not going to explode," she stated with the kind of off the cuff casualness most would describe the clouds above.

"You named it?" I asked when I could find a breath to speak with

Fizzy nuzzled the grenade a little longer before she stuffed it back inside of her saddlebag. "Of course. There's nothing wrong with naming a toy. And you carry around a book."

"You're right, but it's several books, and I don't name them," I defended myself as I rolled back up to my haunches. "But I understand. You care for it as much as I do my books. There's no difference. I just wasn't expecting it. I mean, why not a bomb for your mark, then?"

"But my cutie mark is a bomb," Fizzy stressed with some concern. She adjusted her glasses, turned and pushed her coat to show off the mark on her flank. "The first homemade device I made was using a Sparkle-Cola bottle. See the explosion around it."

"I thought that was a sparkle, or a starburst."

"Nope. Explosion. Don't get me wrong, I love Sparkle-Cola, it's so incredibly useful, but I learned a long time ago what my special something is," she pointed out, looking back at me with a toothy grin.

"I-yeah, yeah, you're something special all right, Fizzy," I laughed quietly and looked back out over the water. "So explosives have always been your thing. That Haystack must be a rough place."

Fizzy's good mood set up an out-to-lunch sign and bolted. She looked at the sand, took a breath, and focused on the ground between her forehooves. "Well, no, not really."

I looked to the mare from the corner of my eye. "Won't push, won't push," I assured her, "But I can't say I understand."

"I know. You don't have information. You cannot," Fizzy admitted in a dull tone. Her head sank, and she took a conflicted look at me. "We've traveled together for a few days at most. I have to think of my home. We," she took a deep breath, "as a rule try to avoid foreigners. It's for our safety. I can't go any further than that with you, Curtain Call. I won't."

"Good enough to help you get your soda though, right?" I asked, not bothering to hide the annoyed hurt in my voice. I didn't think she would notice it anyways.

"You're here because you want to be. It has nothing to do with me. I told you all I can. You can leave at any time." Her words were flat and she wasn't looking at me when she said them. I watched her unflinchingly stony expressionless expression looking for a crack. I couldn't find a single one.

We sat in silence for a good while. The only sounds the lapping waves and the distant creaking of an out of sight dock bobbing on the water. I looked down at the sand, and back over at the fire, and back to Fizzy, and back to the sand again. Then, I noticed the PipBuck around my foreleg. Useless hunk of old world technology that I couldn't get off of me. It's dead face looked up at me, as dark as the water and mocking me with its pointlessness.

"You said you could fix this?" I asked, leaning to try and catch Fizzy's eye, holding out my hoof and wagging the PipBuck back and forth.

Fizzy looked down at my PipBuck. She poked at it with a hoof. Unsurprisingly, it didn't suddenly leap to life. "I can, but I don't have the tools to get into it, I lack the matrix to reboot the system, and I don't have the materials to repair the hardware. Not only that, but I'm not certain I can really get this thing going as good as it could be with what I know. Tinker, back home, she could do it, but I'm not sure of my ability to."

I nodded, taking my hoof back, keeping my eyes on it. I watched my hope for finding some purpose for the PipBuck dwindle away as I put thought to what Fizzy said. "And as an outsider, I can't get in to talk with her, right?"

Fizzy shook her head. My hope came back from its short vacation. "If you help me get this soda back home, they'd probably make an exception."

I shook my head. The statement floored me. I sputtered, I stammered, and I still managed to get out an outburst. "Wait what? You can't tell me a goddesses damned thing about this place, but I help you get soda and I can waltz right in there?"

Fizzy gave me a little shrug and a sort of 'go figure' nod coupled with an embarrassed grin.

"Okay, okay," I tapped my forehead, trying to parse the skewed version of reasoning I was confronted with. "If I'm going to be getting this soda there anyways, why still be secretive about it?" I asked, my voice pained from the sudden headache I was feeling.

"Because you haven't gotten it there yet."

"Okay, see this?" I asked, gesturing at my nose. "Do you see this blood?"

"It kind of matches your coat, and it's dark, so it's hard."

"That's beside the point," I deadpanned. "This blood running out of my nose is not there because I was kicked by him." I pointed over toward Two-Shot, just in case she missed that part. "It's because the words that just came out of your mouth made something up in my brain go 'pop'."

Fizzy began to laugh, intermittently broken up by a snort. She flopped over onto her side in a fit of giggles. "I'm, I'm sorry," she managed to squeeze the words between a guffaw and a stray chortle.

"I'm glad I could get you your jollies, really I am." I said while I watched her roll on the sand. "But it wasn't that funny, Fizz."

I stood around for an awkward minute or so while Fizzy got the laughing fit out of her system. When she finally deigned to let the rest of the world in on what was so funny, she spoke in breathless gasps. "You, you're right. It's just silly and stupid when you think about it. I, I had just looked at it that way so long I never really thought about it. When you pointed out how silly it was, I just had to laugh."

There was not a thing I could do but nod along to the explanation. "So," I asked, tapping at my chin, "You're going to tell me about this Haystack?"

"Nope."

"But you just said it was silly. Do I need to tell the brain joke again?"

Fizzy shook her head and had to adjust her glasses. "I said it was silly, and it is, but that doesn't change my home's policy, and I follow it. It's, um," she looked over toward the fire. "It's like one of Two-Shot's rules."

"That's not really a good example."

"Good point," Fizzy noted without missing a beat. "Can you consider it a request? Or, if you'd like, I could say that if you poke me too much about it before I'm ready, I'll wire you to explode."

"That works," I agreed, laughing in a genial way. I still hoped that the grin Fizzy had suddenly grown meant she was just joking. I couldn't be certain she was.

"Um, but if we can be serious, please," Fizzy said, her voice dropping with gravitas. "If something does happen to me, I want you to take my map and make sure to get that soda to Haystack. I know you don't have anything else going for you right now, and if you do that, they will take you in. It'll give you something, at least."

I paused at the sudden tonal shift. Caught off guard and unsuspecting, I did what anypony would have done in the same situation. I agreed. I nodded and agreed to risk my neck for ponies I didn't know, for a

prize I couldn't be certain of, in a place I had never been to. A nice, secretive, presumably safe hideaway was a tantalizing apple though. Not to mention it would be one of those things that could get my story tossed up on the radio once in a while, maybe do some good for everypony.

"Yeah," I said suddenly, "You can trust in me, Fizzy." I jabbed the grey unicorn in the shoulder and gave her my broadest grin. The crossroads of untreated cuts and a blooded nose and mouth built up since yesterday made the grin very appealing.

"Thanks," Fizzy said, and settled into watching the water again. I joined alongside and took in the view.

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"Wakey wakey, dickweed."

My eyes snapped open. I groaned and rolled on my side, pulling the covers over my head to shut out the annoying wet rasp of the taunting voice. My head ached, my body ached, I did not need a pain in the ass to add to the current list of maladies.

I didn't go to sleep with covers. Nor did I fall asleep on a bed. I pushed myself up and blinked the sleep from my eyes. A blue silk blanket, a stuffed, warm bed, and the puffiest pillow I had ever had the blissful pleasure to sleep on all surrounded me. This was wrong, this was very wrong.

I leapt from the bed. I tried to leap from the bed. In actuality, it was more of a silk shrouded flop. I disengaged myself from the comfortable cocoon and got to my hooves. I took stock of my surroundings as I walked about to find my bearings, and some marbles since I obviously had just lost mine. The walls were polished wood, dark and glossy. Silver sconces held candles that cast light and shadows upon the bedroom. I passed by a desk covered in intricate swirling carvings and made of smoothly curving lines cut out of a wood as black as night. To my right was a gigantic wardrobe that loomed stately against the wall, again carved with similar swirling lines and marking, edged and tipped with gold. I whistled to myself, impressed with this room I managed to find myself in.

When I turned around, I was face to face with a portrait of myself. It was massive. Taking up the entire wall behind my bed, I stood large and proud, a gleaming smile on my face as I looked down from upon a stage. I wore a rich collar and studs with gleaming diamonds in them. The light seemed to make the painted diamonds sparkle, that was the level of workmanship of the grand portrait of yours truly.

"Done sightseeing yet, fucko?"

I twitched, jumping and looking around at the sudden sound of the voice. My eyes narrowed and I cast a look of suspicion over the room. A dark closet door drew my attention. Tentatively I approached the door. Slowly I reached for the latch. The door opened silently and slowly. Inside was a battered old radio, not unlike the one I lost to Scorch. No. It was exactly like the one that burned up.

The dial clicked on and moved of its own accord. A single light illuminated the radio. A static crackled burst from the speaker. "Surprised?"

I started daggers at the little appliance. The pony on the other side was to blame and I knew it. "Okay, where am I and what do you want from me?" I asked, cutting to the chase. I was in no mood to play



around with the voice on the radio again.

A pop, crackle, and a hiss came from the radio. It was laughing at me. He was laughing at me. "Your dream, red, not mine. No way would I come up with a place like this. This is all you."

That answered a grand total of nothing, even if I could trust the voice to be truthful. I looked around, and at the giant portrait of me again. "So why are you here?" I asked, "If this is my dream."

I didn't think a radio could shrug, but somehow I could just tell the pony that supplied the voice was taunting me with one. "I just leave that kind of impression on ponies."

"Great," I groused, shutting the closet door on the radio. "I've spoken to you twice and already I've had enough of you. I don't need you to jump into my dreams, too."

"I know, it's a little intimate, and it's really fucking unoriginal but my message is a bit too important for that." The radio crackled at me, cackled at me, from the ornate desk.

I froze in my tracks. I looked at the desk and the beaten old radio. I very slowly opened the door to the closet. Just darkness greeted me. I slammed the door and stared with wide eyes at the radio

"Dream, fuckwit," the radio reminded me. "Now you want to tell me what was going on out there?"

"I already explained-,"

The radio cut me off. "Not you and runt, Red. You and mare. Who the fuck are you to go off like some sort of noble stallion like that?"

The question knocked me back. "There's a lot in it for me if do it. You were watching, apparently, so you know what she said."

Can a radio nod? This one seemed to. "You're right, I did, but unlike you, I was paying attention. You really think there is any sort of chance you can come through on that? You're really fucking funny, you know that? You make me laugh." To prove his point, he did just that, his raspy laughter mixing with the crackling of the old radio set.

"Who's to say I can't?"

"I do, dumbass. I've been saying it, you just haven't been listening. But maybe you're right. You have done well. Oh, wait. It was that pink bitch, and she's well done. Yeah, you did a real good job of that one."

I sneered at the radio. I didn't have anything I could say to it, though. It was right. I dropped my head and looked at the floor. It was spotless, looked like no one had ever used it. When I slunk to the ground, I found it was ice cold, too.

"Oh yeah, you realize now that it was you. It was all you. You taking your sweet time to strut around in the basement celebrating your own magnificent ability to fuck up an ambush and luck out with a con. Then you finally get your ass upstairs you see the big blue bastard coming. What do you do? You pull the mare out of the flames? Goddesses no. You already fucked her literally, why not metaphorically too? Let her

burn so you can get out. When the pyro's busy, you ran out to safety with your meal ticket. Yeah, you think you got away with that? No such luck, Red. I noticed. I always notice."

"I tried to get Scorch into the basement. I wanted to take him down for killing Cherry. For burning my place down. For causing all of this." I spoke, but my words were weak and directed at me for my own benefit, not to argue the radio.

"Bullshit," the radio maintained. "Isn't knowing how ponies think your little gig there? You knew he wouldn't follow you down there. You knew you were safe."

I didn't answer the radio. I didn't think he was right, but he could have been. It wasn't a stretch, after all. I knew he was smart. I should have known he was quick enough to get over his own ego.

"Don't beat yourself up too much. You suck, but all ponies suck. It's their way of life. Look at the old world. They tried to kill everyone, pony and zebra. Couldn't even do that right. It's a shit world. Sooner you realize that, the better."

I looked at the floor from my prone sprawl. I slid my hoof back and forth, thinking about the radio and its words. "You know what?" I asked, picking myself up and looking at the radio. "You keep saying you want to help me, but everything sucks. What's the deal, Radio? What's the angle? What's in it for you? What do you get out of it?"

The radio stood silent and the whole room breathed in the still air. I stared at the radio and it stared back at me with its dial's dim light. "Same as you, Red," the voice croaked over the airwaves without the antagonism, but in the weak tone of the defeatist. "I don't fucking like it, but same as you."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I asked, sharper than I meant to.

"Look around, you unimaginative prick," said the emotionally dead voice of the radio, "Or better yet, wake up."

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Sand does not taste good first thing in the morning. Though I would argue, sand never tastes good. The fact that it does not taste good is especially evident first thing in the morning waking up face down on a beach.

I spat the offending sand back onto the beach from whence it came while I tried to remember just what in the world I had done to get me there. The dull ache in my head served as a quick reminder to the previous night's events. I opened my eyes to chance the world. The world greeted me with more sand. At least there was the water lapping in and out to break the oppressive silence of this long dead and abandoned beachfront.

A quartet of white legs briefly obstructed my beautiful ground level view of the ocean. I ignored them as they passed. Then they passed again, and then passing once more but in the other direction. By the fifth pass by, I had to admit that my curiosity was piqued. I forced myself to my haunches to see what was going on around me.

It was Two-Shot, the white legs were kind of a tip off. He was trotting with a bundle of plants floating alongside him. The plants were ones I had seen before, as a colt, but I had never known the name, nor had I seen them since I parked myself in Manehattan. They had long green stems, looked like tall grass, except for a few that had these fuzzy cigars at the tips.

"What's that?" I slurred out, still muzzy and brain addled from my bad night's sleep. I approached Two-Shot, who had planted himself with his plants and begun to focus his magic on them in earnest.

"Cat tail," He replied in a dull, aching voice that told me he had to concentrate as hard as he could on the tall grass. He seemed to be splitting them apart. The brown cigars to one side, leaves to another, the middles to a third.

I am not a thick pony, but I was not in a position to figure Two-Shot's plan out on my own. "Okay, you're going to have to explain a few things to me," I told the ground next to the unicorn. I repeated it again, this time actually pointing at Two-Shot and adding an internal curse to the radio pony. "What are you doing?"

"Making breakfast," Two-Shot answered, still flat and focused elsewhere, "And nursing a little hangover. Sobriety doesn't impress me at the best of times. This is nowhere close, but we need to eat." He had stopped his partitioning of the plants to focus his attention on me.

"Why are you making breakfast?" I asked, my brain coming back to me after a reminder that it was indeed daytime and its services required, regardless of its protests to the contrary. I sat beside him to inspect what was to be our food.

"Because I'm the only one here that can cook right," Two-Shot answered. He made his point by looking over to where Daisy slept. "That and I don't trust either of you to know what to find out here."

"How would you-." A magically levitated grass thing shoved into my mouth cut me off.

"Because you had to ask what I was doing," Two-Shot stated, leaving me to chew the stalk while he pointed at Fizzy, who was still snoring beside Daisy. "And I expect anything she'd make would explode."

I swallowed my forced breakfast. Not exactly fancy, but the greens were far better than the old world junk that had made up the bulk of my diet. I could see now where the ingredients of the salad I had yesterday came from. The small snack also reminded me that that single morning salad was about all I had to eat in a full day. "You have a point," I choked out, hungrily smacking my lips in anticipation of more food.

"Eat these," Two-Shot pointed to the long green stems. "Leave the tops. We'll burn those to keep smaller bugs away at night." He shook his head and winced. "You kick hard, you son of a bitch," he muttered, laughing to himself.

My mouth was a little full, so I couldn't comment on the compliment. In a way, though, I think it was for the best. I chewed over the greens, surprised at how fresh they seemed. As I got to thinking about it, however, I had to wonder; for all the destruction around me, how much was caused by balefire and how much was simple ravages of time and ponies desperate for survival. I figured I shouldn't have been too surprised as I ate the grasses. If ponies could survive, perhaps other things were hardscrabble enough to make it. And here I was eating those hardscrabble survivors. Somehow, the thought made me feel good about myself. Simple things.

A yawn from across the fire caught my attention. Fizzy sat up in the sand, blinking sleep from her eyes while perched her glasses on her muzzle. They sat level for all of a half second before tilting to their usual list. "Morning?" she asked, squinting up at the clouds filling the sky.

"For lack of a better term," I suggested. "And we have breakfast over here. Not exactly gourmet, but better than nothing."

Fizzy managed her way over to us. She gave the greens a careful once over before taking an uncertain bite. The uncertainty melted away and she was chowing down eagerly. What we saw sent both Two-Shot into sputtering laughter.

"What?" Fizzy asked, looking around for the cause of the sudden laughter. One whole side of her Mohawk had been coated in a layer of sand. She scratched the side of her head, and still managed to remain unaware.

"What do you use to keep your mane standing like that?" Two-Shot asked when his snickering subsided to an amused sigh. My snickering was still going strong.

"Wonderglue, why?" Fizzy asked. Then it came to her all at once. Her head hung and she gave a deep groan dredged from the wells of exasperation.

The flower of laughter bloomed anew in Two-Shot and me. When it finally died down, we were left looking at a scowling Fizzy. "I'm sorry, but it just looks silly," I tried to explain, even through the remaining grin.

Fizzy suddenly dropped the scowl and took up a grin of her own. "Oh, it's okay. I think I understand. But," She paused; her horn became sheathed in a silvery glow. A loud bang filled our ears and the beach between Two-Shot and I burst upward, coating both of us in wet, heavy sand.

Both Two-shot and I sat dumbfounded at the sudden burst, blinking in stunned surprise as globs of the wet dirt sloughed off us and back to the beach. Considering this was Fizzy's doing, I probably should not have been all that surprised that she'd have some kind of magical firecracker at hoof. Just goes to figure with unicorns.

Fizzy cracked up, shaking the sand from her mane, leaving Two-Shot and I to try to shake the sand from our everything. Something broke at that moment. A mutual realization within all of us that this moment of levity was an indulgence we could afford. I broke first, joining Fizzy in laughter; Two-Shot cracked a grin and then burst forth like a levy giving way. The only one of us there not laughing was the unfortunate Daisy, who continued to lie still, breathing deeply at rest.

Two-Shot was the first to stop laughing when he saw Daisy. He got to hooves, moved to check on the mare. He looked down at her with a distant sadness that he struggled to keep in check. "What do you think?" he asked the air. "Do you think she'll make it through this?" His eyes rose to look toward Fizzy.

The gray unicorn looked unflappable under the desperate, sorrowful, questioning gaze. Despite her appearance, she still had little answer other than a shrug and a shake of her head. "I don't know," she admitted, "I'm not a doctor. I know a little bit, but without someone with training, I can only do so much. Not to mention our lack of supplies."

Two-Shot's face fell. He looked toward Daisy with plaintive need. "Then I'll go get supplies," he said with quiet resolve, lifting his head to look toward Fizzy. "When I was looking for something for us to eat I passed over a few buildings still standing. We could probably find something there."

"You didn't check them out already?" I questioned.

Two-Shot shook his head. "Not alone, not hungry, and not first thing in the morning. Too much risk to it," he directed his hoof at me, "Now, though, you're coming with me and she'll stay here to watch Daisy."

Fizzy snorted, "I'm not Cherry, you know. I'm not a doctor. I'm nearly useless here."

Two-Shot shut his eyes and took a deep breath. He swallowed the retort as best as he could, opened his eyes, and gave Fizzy a reptilian glare. "I know damn well you aren't Cherry. I know damn well we need her now. But she isn't fucking with us anymore." He seethed through his teeth. "You're still better than the big guy, and you can lay a minefield to keep anything from getting close. That work for you?"

Fizzy nodded tersely, and looked down at her hooves. "You make a good point. I'm, I'm sorry for not thinking through your logic," she said with the begrudging mumble of the embarrassed.

"Um, yeah, hey, I'm still here," I pointed out, standing up, not liking the way Two-Shot just shot down Fizzy. "You know, you aren't exactly our leader here. I'm here for Fizzy. She's out here to get supplies for her home. You did a lot for us, but you said it yourself, Scorch was after your head too. Don't act as if it were just us who brought this shitstorm. And besides all that, do you really think we're that cold? We're going to help you. We're all in this together now. So give us the benefit, alright?"

Two-Shot gave me a dark eye before looking away. He looked back again, begging a back and forth debate with himself. It was a step forward in the right direction, getting him thinking about himself. It paid off when he gave a grudging nod. "Yeah, yeah, okay. Just don't bring her up again."

"Got it," I answered. "First thing's first, though. Let's get some food in us."

\* \* \*

It turned out that Two-Shot was not bragging when he claimed to be the better cook out of the lot of us. He had somehow turned a mishmash of preserved old world food. I hadn't thought that a centuries old food could be cobbled together into something that tasted like actual food. The only problem with the meal was that I couldn't eat my fill. We only had so much to go around, and with supplies as low as they were, that much had to be spread thin.

"I think we should say a few words," I spoke up, staring at the dull gray overcast that perpetually hung over our heads.

Two-Shot was eyeing me from where he sat, suspicious of my intention and already cultivating a fresh mood swing.

"Don't look at me like that," I called him out on his stare. "She deserves it, don't you think?"

If looks could kill, Two-Shot would already have put me in a hole in the ground. Thing was, he knew I was right. I could see it in his face, the melting reluctance giving way to a shallow nod. "So what are you suggesting?" he asked in a last ditch effort to throw me off the subject. "Can't pull a funeral; she's all the way back there, can't bury her."

I held a smile. "Who says we need one? You have the memory, and Fizzy and I, we didn't know her long, but I can't say we'd be here if it weren't for her."

"Call's right, you know," Fizzy came in with the assist. "We owe her, and I don't know about Call, but I think it would be kind."

"You two are right," Two-Shot admitted, the dark look drained away for a weak smile. "I should. She fucking deserves it. I just want to Daisy to be around for it. Feels kind of cheap without her involved."

I nodded, Fizzy as well. "It's a sure thing," I told the sniper, getting to my hooves. "So let's get going."

\* \* \*

A smattering of letters remained on the battered and broken sign that stood along the outside wall of the half-collapsed building that stood in front of Two-Shot and I. What few letters there were, coupled with the stained and shadowy outline of long since fallen told us the crumbling structure was once a hospital. What was once, I assumed, a bright and shining symbol of health and care had long since given itself away to a dingy yellow color that looked as sickly as the wasteland itself. I could see that only one floor seemed to be left standing whole, the upper floors collapsed and crushed in on themselves, with only part of a second bearing the weight from above.

The hospital was a good distance north of our beach position. Most of the walk was spent with Two-Shot and I keeping trekking past crumbled and destroyed shops and homes. What few buildings we had found standing were mostly empty save for some small amount of food that Two-Shot picked through with discerning taste, deciding what was worth keeping or not. He threw out a lot that I would have just taken, but I deferred to him on the food front.

He had seen the hospital first, spotting it standing on a hill while I was digging through a foundation to recover some useable scrap metal and wood to stuff into my pack. Two-Shot didn't balk. I figured this mutual respect was a sign of good things and hoped for better.

"There's got to be something somewhere in here," Two-shot muttered as we pushed past the double doors into the hospital's reception area. Long benches lined the walls leading to a round desk bearing the placard for the receptionist. Paper lay strewn about the floor. A Sparkle-Cola machine flickered and struggled to hold its post as the reception room's long internal light source. The whole room was silent as the grave and just as still.

"Three bottles," I told Two-Shot, slipping the soda I rescued from their mechanical prison into my saddlebags. The unicorn was checking on the reception desk terminals for any help in locating stock. "Anything?"

Two-Shot just shook his head. "Both broken," he answered, leaving the rusted out devices to continue on their rotten path to oblivion. "Just take a look around. It's a hospital. There's something."

The hallway and the next several rooms yielded little. What few medical supplies we could find, mostly small instruments, we tucked away in my bags for safekeeping. A downed Mr. Hoof model robot retained enough working parts for me to pull out a sellable if not useable supply. In the cafeteria we even managed to find some, for lack of a better term, food to take back with us. I made Two-Shot carry the questionable looking edibles. No place had a single sign of life, however. Not a roach, a scorpion, or even parasprite seemed to exist in the old hospital. The floors were messy, much of the metal was rusting, and some of the wood had given to rot, but it all lacked any sign of life within the walls.

"Who are the Bastards?" I asked Two-Shot. He replied with a shrug as we both looked up at the words THE BASTARDS painted in large letters on the walls of the hospital's ransacked pharmacy. When we had found the room, there was no door. What remained of it was in two pieces and lay on the far wall from where it had originally been. Cupboards and shelves lay in pieces on the floor. Bits of glass and wood, from tiny glittery chips to large, sharp shards made stepping and digging through the rubble a dangerous prospect. The searching ceased when we stopped to read the writing on the wall.

"Whoever those bastards are," Two-Shot said, closing the door of an empty cupboard, "They beat us to it." He kicked at the wall in frustration. The little panel door fell off its remaining hinge and joined the refuse on the floor.

Other than the trashed insides and the graffiti coated walls, there was nothing of value to be found in the pharmacy. Whoever the Bastards were, they were thorough. The small room was not only picked clean, but also left in such a state it would have been hours of picking through for nothing had the pair of us been more desperate than we were. As it stood, we still spent well over an hour and had nothing to show for it but enough shards to rebuild the door and start a small toothpick company on the side.

"What about upstairs?" I wondered aloud, looking down the hall, back towards where we came. "Part of it still looked standing. There could still be more."

"You really are a salvager," Two-Shot said, passing by me en route for the stairs. He looked over his shoulder, and shot me a self-satisfied grin.

"Got me dead to rights," I answered with an ear-to-ear grin, following Two-Shot.

We discovered a small problem when it came to actually climbing the stairs. The problem mainly lay in the fact that there were no more stairs anymore. Two-Shot and I stood at the precipice between floors. Rubble lay below us and above us, the just out of reach second floor.

"Damn it," I scowled at the gap between floors. "Alright, I think I can, ow!" I snapped less in pain than surprise at Two-Shot's sudden clambering up my back like a mountain goat. "What the blazes are you doing?"

"Stay still," Was all Two-Shot told me, perched on my back, his hooves trying for purchase on the reinforcing plates of my barding. I got the feeling he was eyeing the gap with hope now that I had just been requisitioned as a springboard.

"You done up there?" I asked after growing tired of being kicked in the back of the head. He just had to keep managing to find the spot between my barding and my hard hat.

Teetering and tottering managed, I felt Two-Shot go still on my back. "Hold still down there, alright? Good. Now for Luna's sake, give me a boost over to the other side."

I bucked. Hard.

Two-Shot crashed, upside down, into the far wall of the second floor hallway. He slid to the ground and scowled at me in an inverted heap.

"That's for headache I'm going to have thanks to you," I said, full of petty jocularity.

"I'm going to kill you," Two-Shot's threat lacked any real malice as he untangled himself and got his hooves under him. "Do you hear me? I will kill you for that."

I continued to beam up at Two-Shot. "So are you going to find a way to get me up there too, or do you think you can catch me?"

Two-Shot took a look down the hallway on either side of him. "I got you; just don't expect me to cart your ass without any help. You got to jump."

Help in hoof, I took a step back, crouched, psyched myself up and ran for the gap. I threw myself into the air, putting all of my muscle behind my leap and soared over the gap. The rubble down on the first floor passed beneath me, the broken edge of the second floor as well. I laughed at my triumph; I had cleared the jump with no problem at all.

I slammed right into a white hued arcane barrier and crashed to the floor. "You are an asshole," I muttered from my suddenly very floor centered perspective.

"Never denied it," Two-Shot told me, punctuation supplied via a swift, if mercifully light, kick to my side. He trotted off down the hallway, leaving me to pick up and dust myself off. It was worth it.

When I did get up and go after Two-Shot, we were greeted with another, albeit smaller, series of desolate rooms. The music of the wind blew through the holes in the walls and windows, playing loud and clear in the otherwise silent corridors. A door slammed, sending bits of broken wood and glass crashing down. Room after room was tossed, but empty. Their yellow and pink aid kits torn open and robbed of their contents by those that came before. Each blow of the wind ate at our nerves and each cleaned kit frayed those nerves even further.

I walked into the last room that we could possibly get in. Ahead of us, the hallway had fallen, creating a gap too large to get across. This room was, for the most part, identical to the other patient and exam rooms we had been in today. Except for one particular detail that set it apart. There was no wall on one side and a much smaller gap. More important was a little flash of yellow half buried in the crumbled rubble.

"Two-Shot. I got one!" I called out. "'Come here. I need to throw you again."

The unicorn popped in shortly. "You do?" he asked, following my line of sight as he approached. "You do," he agreed.



We worked out a simple plan. A variation on the earlier lesson in backstabbing and one that would, we hoped, involve not so much hitting walls. I crouched before the gap. Two-Shot backed up, out into the hallway. I planted myself, getting low and steady. Two-Shot charged. I braced. His hooves hit my shoulder and I threw myself upward, launching Two-Shot threw the air. He turned a full somersault and landed on all fours on the other side.

Two-Shot and I cheered, whooping and hollering at the success of our little acrobatic stunt. "Now grab that thing and let's get the buck out of here. We have a mare to save," I said with no lack of pride.

A nod from Two-Shot and he turned to dig the yellow box out of the rubble. He kicked aside joist and paneling, wood and plaster to get down to the medical kit. Free from the refuse, Two-Shot's magic surrounded the case and wrenched it to freedom. A quick check confirmed it; we had supplies.

"Catch!" Shouted Two-Shot, and the medical kit came hurtling at my head. It came quick, tossed by Two-Shot's magic. I yanked it from its flight, caught tight in my teeth. I left it hanging on my tail from the handle to wait for the unicorn.

Two-Shot's leap was good. He cleared good space, flew well, and for a pony carrying a large rifle and a bulky revolver, the jump was very impressive. It just wasn't enough of a jump to clear the gap. He hit, front legs on the floor, the rest of him hanging in the air, hind legs wheeling. He gasped at the sudden blow to his ribs and began to slip.

I tried to reach him; I dove and snapped my teeth on the back strap of his revolver's holster. I pulled, but the holster slipped from my jaws, snapping back and falling on my haunches.

A thud and a chorus of cursing groans came from the lower floor.

Peering over the edge, I looked down below. Two-Shot rolled on his back, eyes closed and teeth clenched. He may have taken a much worse fall not all that long ago, but he was far, far less numb this time around. I winced in sympathy pain and jumped after him to give him a hoof. The drop wasn't quite as bad when expected. It stung, but nothing more serious than that.

I helped Two-Shot to his hooves. He continued to groan and stretch his side, wincing. "I'm not going to do that without med-ex again," he muttered, confirming my theory. "I'm good, though. Glad you stuck with me, but this happens again, you get back to Daisy and let me be. I'll be okay."

"I'm not just going to leave you to lay there, Two-Shot," I reminded the unicorn. "We have what we need, anyways, let's just get out of here."

"Problem is, our exit is that way," Two-Shot pointed out, directing my attention to the pile of collapsed building that blocked our path back.

"Well damn. Looks like we're hunting an exit now." I wasn't going to let this setback get me down. We had some supplies, we were both doing well, we could get ourselves out in no time. I did all that I could do, just turn and start down the ward hallway along with Two-Shot.

This ward was cleaner, less touched by time and outsiders. I could only imagine that Two-Shot and I were

the first to come through this area in ages. The walls were still relatively pristine, only slightly faded with age from their original pastel blue. The lights did not work, but enough streamed in from the breaks and spaces to let us adjust easily enough to the dim lighting. If it wasn't for the rest of the building tumbling down around it, the hallway we found ourselves in was a nearly pristine time capsule of the pre war age.

There was tarnish to the time capsule ward hall. Tarnish that came in the form of a skeleton that lay splayed out in the middle of the hallway, flush against the wall, underneath a dirty brown splotch. Draped over the ribcage of the long deceased pony was a battle saddle with mounted shotgun. It was old, but it looked good. Even if I couldn't make use of it, I could hawk it for a good price. The dead pony wasn't about to be using it anymore, so I felt little qualm over scattering the bones to get at my prize.

The scene was suspicious, but I didn't even bother to question it until I had tossed the gun and battle saddle to drape haphazardly over my back. "Hey, Two-Shot, why do you think this guy was killed here? This place is untouched, seems kind of weird he'd just be here."

"Something to do with this, I bet," Two-Shot's answer sounded distracted, and I couldn't blame him. He was looking at a pair of double doors down the hall from the skeleton. A fire hose, pulled from a red box along the wall, wound tight around the door's push bars in a makeshift lock. There was something unsettling creeping up the back of my spine as I approached the door.

"This part of the hospital hasn't been touched in what, at least a hundred or two years?" I asked, trying to downplay the bubbling feeling of unease percolating in my stomach. "Whatever was locked in there has to be long dead."

Two-Shot nodded. "Don't take chances," he said, backing from the door. His magic flared, enveloped his revolver and drew it into the air. "Get the door open and get out of my way."

The hose was old, it was well onto rotting, and tearing it aside was an easy job. The taste of rust and dust would stay with me after biting down and pulling it away. No sooner had I freed the door from the binding did it swing outward. I leapt away, tumbling to safety, twisting mid roll to face the thing inside the ward.

All that attacked us was a small wave of bones clattering noisily to the floor at my hooves. Pony bones, and so many I couldn't make heads or tails of just how many must have died on the other side of the door. Skulls and spines, arms and legs spread out on the floor in a skeleton helter-skelter.

"Damn," Two-Shot spoke under his breath. No surprise, no fear at the sudden onrush of bones, just a dull puzzlement. I can't say I felt any different than he sounded. No danger, only confusion was here.

We pushed onward, stepping over the carpet of long dead ponies. We had other things on our mind. Ponies who needed us, ponies who needed the supplies we carried. At least while we were here, we could dig through this ward. After all, it could contain more medical equipment, or at least some salvage worth peddling.

The ward was empty as any we had passed through, but it was cleaner and larger. An untouched tomb for the souls of those that surged from the doorway long past the time they had hoped to. Beds still lined the walls, and in several of them, some skeletons still lay. Unmoved by what caused the others to flee in vain; they were just as still now. I looked over the clipboards that hung at the foot of each of the beds. The names were all different, but they all had a similar trait in common.

"Soldiers," I said, casting a glance over to Two-Shot. He had secured one of the yellow and pink cases from the wall and was busying himself with gutting its contents to stuff in his bags. The revolver still floated about him. He looked up at me from his packing. "They all have rank listings. These ponies were all military."

"Well, they're with Celestia now. Can't do anything for them," Two-Shot responded before going back to cataloguing the contents of the case. "They all went out together. They had that at least."

I looked over to the door, over at the bones that lay scattered about the entryway. "They all went out together, alright," I repeated. Something struck me as enduringly morose about whatever had happened here. These ponies were trying to get out, and they never had the chance. I couldn't afford to ponder the past, however. I left the thought and continued digging through the room.

Two-Shot had caught the haul. I found little else but mementos that held a lot of sentimental value to someponies long dead, but not a lot of the real variety. At the end of the ward, I found a terminal in good condition, sitting and glowing faintly. It had waited all these years to be used again. I tried my hoof at it, and found myself walled off by a passcode.

"Hey, Two-Shot, you got that other terminal working, right?" I asked, trying to find the unicorn.

"Yeah, I've been around a few before." Two-Shot came out from underneath one of the beds, a soldier's pack bag now hung from his neck. "What've you got?"

"That's kind of what I'm asking you for."

Two-Shot snorted, trotting over toward the computer. I stepped aside so he could get to work. He focused on the terminal, his horn glowing faintly, his hooves ticking off the controls. I just walked away to let him work, and work he did. He was through the code with surprising speed. I had barely enough time to inspect the sturdy canvas bag he had secured.

"It wasn't hard," Two-Shot explained, reading the terminal. "I was shown a few things by an old partner of mine. You can shoot your way past locks, but terminals, you need to speak their language." The explanation struck me as odd, given I never solicited it, but I shrugged it off.

"It's all garbage," Two-Shot added after poring over the information held on the old world machine. "Transfer to Dancer's Psychiatric Hospital. Transfer to Dancer's. Transfer. Battle fatigue. Battle fatigue. Transfer," he rattled off line after line with increasing frustration at the lack of useful information on the terminal.

"Can't all be good," I offered with a shrug. "We've got a few more healing potions and some chems out of it at least." I made my way to the door, stepping over the pile of bones on my way out. I didn't wait for Two-Shot, I knew he would be right behind me. It was best to leave the dead to their resting and I was feeling anxious to do what was best.

We eventually managed to find an exit. Not an exit so much as a window, and not find so much as angrily-toss-a-chair-through, but the difference was negligible. I boosted Two-Shot out first, and he used the chair to clear out a hole in the glass large enough for me to get through without gutting myself on

shards. We were out on the far side of the hospital from where we began, but the sky still had that welcome dull gray of the daytime and we were happy with it. Moreover, we had one more major discovery in the form of pull cart left behind. It was faded yellow, and had a series of butterflies painted on it, those familiar colors and the padding in the back spoke enough of the cart's purpose.

Two-Shot and I stuck a proud feather in our caps, tossed my finds in the back of the cart, hitched me up, and went on our way back to the beachfront. Thank the goddesses for a change of luck.

\* \* \*

"Pass that bottle over here!" I shouted with a laugh. A silvery haze bobbed and bobbled around a bottle as it made its way over to me. I drank freely, the liquor burned warm in my throat. I soaked in the feeling as it ran into my full stomach. Fizzy's magic clung around it as it poured. I coughed, spitting some of it onto the sand but laughing all the same. Waving the bottle aside, it settled into the sand between our jubilant quartet.

The firelight danced off the lot of us. I sat with my back to the beach. Fizzy was to my right, her magic making a trio of bottles orbit her head and grinning at a joke Daisy was telling involving two fillies, a bee's nest and a sleeping raider. Daisy had come to while we were out, and though we couldn't give get her back at a hundred percent, she was good enough to be up and chatting. We all knew she would need a doctor to fix the more serious problems, but med-ex and companionship were doing their part for now. Two-Shot was the one supplying most of that companionship. He hadn't left Daisy's side from the moment we got back. He hovered and doted like a guard dog, only leaving to gather up something for us to eat. As with breakfast, he pulled another filling meal out of thin air and garbage. The night had fun and friendship, and we indulged, but we all knew there was one thing that had to be done.

"You ready for this?" I asked the small white unicorn that was clambering up into the back of our salvaged hospital cart.

He responded with a nod and a swing from the liquor bottle that floated about his head. He stood tall, his bellowing voice enhanced by magic. "I'm not good at this. I never was. So, here it is. This is for Cherry. She was the best damn wasteland doctor I ever met. She loved everypony, and she treated them all like we should. She saved my ass more than once, and she did the same with every one of us. We all owe something to her, even if you only knew her a day. Thing is, even if she only knew you for a minute she treated you like she knew you forever. We could only hope to do the same. So here it is, here's to you, Cherry. Hope those damn goddesses treat you right since they had the backbone to take you from us. Hope they're happy they got you, too. Cause I sure as fuck need you right about now."

Two-Shot sank, dropping to sit and stare down at the sand. "Here's one last drink," he said, voice barely a squeak. The whiskey bottle that floated nearby turned over and rammed itself into the sand, buried nearly to the bottom. "I sucked that one up," he told no one in particular.

"But it was all true," Daisy said from her spot on the sand. "When Two-Shot and I met Cherry, she was all that was left of her settlement; she had tried to keep them all alive even without equipment. She even tried to help the raiders that were left behind by their own. That's what kind of pony she was. You two saw her, she had the slightest chance to get out and help, and she jumped right on it. That's why I'm going to see this out to the end, and I'm sure Two-Shot is going to too. And I won't take a no for an answer, Fizadora. You hear me?"

Fizzy was looking at the ground. "This is, um, this was not accounted for, but it will help, greatly. I'm sorry I didn't get to know her better. I know I can't be blamed for it, but I am sorry all the same." She was drawing a little circle in the sand with a foreleg. "I'm also very bad at these things. Sorry."

"You did your best to keep me alive, stick to doing that, honey, and you and I'll get along just fine," Daisy said with a bittersweet laugh.

I knocked a hoof against the side of the hospital cart. "I know it ain't much, but I remember a little song from when I was foal. If you don't mind." I didn't wait, beginning to tap time against the side of the cart, a slow, steady beat, easy to keep track of.

It was a simple song, three verses, sang twice. I cannot remember where I first heard it, but I could remember it. I knew I couldn't say anything about Cherry, but I could sing. The night was ending, and the wastes had given us a brief stay of execution, but I damn well knew I could sing.

*When I was a little foal, oh I heard my daddy cry  
When I was a little foal, yes I heard my daddy cry  
He didn't think I noticed but I saw it in his eye.*

*He took me by his side told me "Now son I got to say."  
He took me by his side told me "Now son I got to say."  
"Your mama, boy, she loves you now but has to go away"*

*Where is mamma going, dad, is mamma going far?  
Tell me where is mamma going and is it very far?  
She's gone to be with Luna, son, to be a brand new star.*