

Murphy's Law

"If anything can go wrong, it will..."

"She, she is dying," The doctor said.

My hoof stomped down cracking concrete. "Then. Fix. It."

I didn't remember much of what happened after the drug dealers lair. Visions of fire and rage swam through my memory but were gone just as quick. What I do know is that me and Flare managed to safely carry Serenity back up to the Finisher headquarters where they proved themselves useless. Had her life not been in their hands I would have killed them all.

"Ve cannot." The Finisher's doctor said with a shake of her head.

"Do it. Anyway." My voiced was cracked and strained, while tears stung my eyes. Most ponies on the verge of tears looked pathetic; I looked frightening.

"Ve...Ve have not ze technology." The mare was visibly shaking over the body of Serenity.

She was strapped down to the table her coat pale with life visibly leaving her eyes more each second. The stake was still in her chest stained with blood, and the doctors were too afraid to remove it. They said she'd bleed out if they tried to remove it. They said she needed a blood transfusion. They said they needed medical equipment they didn't have. They needed to save her, because if they didn't nopony could save them from me.

The door creaked open and a familiar blue unicorn stepped sterile white room. "Hired Gun." She said softly, "Iz she well?" How long have I been in that room? I really could not say. It may have been ten minutes, or an hour. But as I saw Serenity draw less air in with each consecutive breath I knew it had been far too long.

"She's dying."

Tension blanked the room like a thick fog.

"For what it iz worth, I. Am sorry."

What the fuck? Who the hell bows like that when a filly is dying five feet from them? Of all the times to stay in character this was the worst. Rage boiled my tears away.

"You will be."

"I-" She was clearly not accustomed to being threatened. There was no need to tell her that I wasn't threatening, I was promising. "It shall no come to zat. I, Photo Finish, have a plan."

I didn't like the sound of that. Nevertheless I tore my eyes away from her and back to the small filly dying on the bed. She seemed so small at that moment. Just a tiny little thing writhing in pain as her body failed

her. My mind raced back to the time I met her. Lying in her own filth. Chained like a monster. She seemed so small then too. So vulnerable. She was just a filly, it wasn't fair that Celestia deemed her to die. To die so close to her home. Tears fell from my eyes for a second before I wiped them away. I could not allow that to happen.

I trusted this Photo Finish little, and her plans none at all. But anything was better than standing around useless as Serenity died. A fool's plan was better than no plan. Even if it was a fool's plan that got her into this mess. "Tell me." I said my voice cracking.

"Flare, come in."

My neck snapped to the door. This was his fault.

His blue face purple.

He gagged. Dying.

It took five of them to pull me off. Had I not heard Serenity whimper it would have taken more. I should have killed him. Let him die on the street like the rat he was. No pony would have cared. No pony would even have noticed. Instead, I took pity on his drugged up ass and went along with his little plan. Raid a drug dealer's base. How hard could it be? Four ponies died in those sewers, and a fifth was coming shortly. I don't care who he was, his life wasn't worth that of five others.

Carefully, I wiped the sweat off Serenity's brow. Behind me I heard Photo Finish go on about... something. I wasn't really paying attention to the details.

"I am supposed to put her life in his hooves?"

Once again I found myself without any viable options. Serenity was dying of internal injuries and the Finisher's doctor had done everything in their power to prolong her life. But they didn't have the abilities to actually remove the spike in her chest. Well they could remove it but she'd die of blood loss before healing potions could fix her. If they gave her healing potions with it still in her chest it'd cause massive internal damage. They didn't have any options. I didn't have any other options.

That is how I found myself in front of the great Disenchantment gate beside a... a something. It looked almost like a carriage but had no visible wheels that I could see. Instead it had a big block of mechanical whosits that Flare claimed was an engine that allowed him to fly with it attached to him with relative ease. Most importantly he claimed it would ride smoothly with Serenity in the back. The Finisher's 'doctor' would be riding along side too, even if he was a sham and deserved a bullet in the brain.

"Iz no choice."

Photo Finish, for her part, was surprisingly accommodating. I was sure it wasn't my charming personality that made her put so much effort into getting Serenity help, but I didn't bother asking. Don't get me wrong. I was grateful for her help; I just would have been more grateful if it wasn't her fault. Well, not really her fault but she did share some of the blame as did Flare.

And me. Of course. And my idiotic means of protection.

"What if he crashes?" Far from my over-emotional state earlier I was feeling much calmer. Though that could have had something to do with the whiskey.

"Ponies die. Unfortunate. But Zat vill not happen. You have mine, Photo Finish's, word on that."

"I'll ride with her."

"No." Flare said harshly walking in front of me. Behind him I saw the ponitrons manning the gates eyeing us with suspicion. "I am...not very strong. Can't take the weight." My muscles tensed, and he must have noticed. Walking towards me he whispered in my ear, *"It's a long run. If you want to keep up. Might want to try some of what you took from me."*

Dash.

Like its name sake it made you go faster. Think faster. Act faster. If what I have been told was correct it'd make you forget you weariness and make you like a bolt of lightning. The Watchers base was on the other side of Dise (not a small distance I assure you) and I was tired, sore, and a little bit drunk. I was not entirely sure I could run the distance, and I did not fancy leaving Serenity alone with strange ponies for any amount of time.

Photo Finish went first, giving the ponitrons our newly acquired, perfectly legal, forged passports she had gotten from Deadhead earlier that day. Three in total, as she herself had no intention of leaving her city. I marched carefully behind Flare who was hovering with his cart just above ground level. The five mechanical things watched us eerily as we passed through the gate. I did my best to look forward and ignore the corpse of the colt that had been gunned down the day before.

In my mind, the colt was named Mischief.

With a crash the gate shut behind us. We were here. This was Dise.

To my right with shining lights in every window was a huge building with a pool in front blasting jets of water into the air. The water streams danced and shimmered in multicoloured light as music blared from hidden speakers. The huge flashing words 'The Moon' doubled as its name and the entrance as stairs lead into the huge 'Os'. What caught my attention most of all, I was ashamed to say, was the pretty young mares in front. Gulping a bit as heat rose to my cheeks, I turned my head.

Directly across the street were a series of smaller hotels and skyscrapers that mostly looked empty, or at the most under filled. Except for a large hotel down the street. It was made up of three large circular buildings that looked almost like large barrels of alcohol connected by a series of bridges and a large rectangle centre first floor in which each building rose from. In front of the building was a large sign stating 'The Ale House!' complete with exclamation mark.

And there were so many ponies!

The street was so large it could have fit fifty ponies abreast and very nearly did. Ponies of all builds and

races swarmed the streets going too and fro. I counted numerous NCA ponies in full blue uniform but obviously not on duty by the way they staggered and swerved. Apparently, I wasn't the only pony what liked a good drink. There was no doubt that this was Dise.

The last city.

None of that mattered. I shook my head. Not the lights or the ponies. Only getting Serenity to safety.

"Flare." I turned to him as he hovered waiting for me. "Go."

He shoot off like a rocket.

Dash. Just one little puff. It couldn't hurt. I needed the speed.

One puff was all it took. Suddenly, everything in this obsessively bright town was. Shiny. So shiny. *Look at all the pretty ponies*, I thought, *I could just go dancing with them-where does HE think he's going!* I could beat him. I was faster. I started after leaving a wave of confused ponies in my wake.

My hoofs beat against the ground like a song. Smash clang smash smash. Smash clang smash smash. I found myself staring at my leg. It sparkled like the stars in the light. Why weren't they all like that? It would have made things so much- "Watch out!" some pony screamed.

Jolting upwards a huge multi tiered water fountain with the stone figure of a stuffy military pony rearing victoriously grew out of the ground. I swerved and circled around it but ran straight into an excessively tall pale green unicorn with a red and orange striped mane.

"Sorry. Nice To Meet You. Gotta Race," I yelled, giggling to myself as I tore away from the pony and continuing my race. I recognized for half a second that the fountain marked a cross road in the city with four streets heading off, each equally large. And shiny. So shiny I wanted to go down them.

Until I saw the cart zooming ahead of me. No fair cheating.

I zipped off again as my hoofs began their racing song. Smash clang smash smash.

Past the fountain more buildings rose up to my right. Lots and lots and most even glowing. Largest of all was a wide stout hotel named 'The Clips And Clops' judging from its flashing sign. It would have been ordinary, even if you counted the abnormal amount of ponitrons standing guard around it, (and the whole block really was swarming with those mechs) except for on top of it was a tower. Not any tower but a huge one that rose up like an arrow to the sky. I had to stretch my neck back to far it hurt just to see that the top floor was shaped like a Pink Pony with an equally pink and poofy mane. It seemed to smiled across the city, the tip of its hair lost in the clouds. I wanted to just watch it as I ran past.

Until nearly ran into a pegasus with two clouds as its cutie mark.

Leaping nimbly over the pony, I skidded on the other side and kept racing.

I was getting a feeling for this city. To my left was going to be another fancy hotel that shattered what I imagined possible. Except there wasn't. I pouted as I weaved in between ponies. There was a hotel, and

it was a fair bit larger than all the other buildings near it but instead of looking high and fancy it looked worn and beaten. Where other hotels had kept their pre-war names this hotel was notably scarred where the old sign was. Instead a huge banner with the words 'Black Salamander Hotel And Casino' painted crudely on it was hung. The only thing even remotely unusual was fact unlike the other three city blocks I passed every light was shining from every window of every building. Right. Boring. Racey racey.

Ahead of me I could see Flare zipping along. I was catching up. He had to slow down to dodge a group of ponitrons escorting an ageing mare in a walker. I too swerved to dodge them but managed to keep my super impressive speed. Hah. I was going to win. Score one for Earth Pony awesomeness.

The road narrowed suddenly to a stone path. The main blocks of Dise were behind me. We were getting closer I knew. Closer to the Watchers. On either side of me in states of disrepair were two large octagonal buildings surrounded by what must have been rather nice looking parks, but had since been burned and charred looking black. A sign I raced past called the place "Luna's Low Income Residency." I couldn't help but notice a multitude of pegasi flying around the left. The right building looked deserted but a shanty town of make-shift houses were perched all around the building.

Whatever. I was running. And losing. Damn cheating pegasus!

We rounded around the Pegasus infested building following a new path and running face first into a wall. Not the great Dise wall but a shorter wall of mortared brick inside Dise. It seemed to cover a large swath of land and was made in the style of castles of old with ramparts and the like. It made me want to be a knight. Sir Silver Storm at your service. Pretty maiden to rescue? Not a problem! A lance is all I need...

Two large wooden gates creaked open as I finally reached Flare and his flying waggon thingy.

"Hey!" I bounced around his side, "Hey. Watcher Guys." Guarding the wooden gate were four ponies with battle-saddles. "Hey! Pay Attention. We have An Injured Filly." The guards ignored me completely and talked in low hushed voices with flare. Assholes. I was being serious.

"HEY! Listen! Filly Here. Needs Care And Shit, Get Your Best Doctors On It Before I-"

The guard with a spike mane glared at me before speaking into a metal-device-thingy on his foreleg, "Got two addicts here. Looks like dash. And a Critically injured filly. Advise."

"I Am Not An Addict," I said bouncing for a second before running to the other side of the cart. "Listen, I-" I stopped talking as a muffled voice emitted from the guards foreleg. I didn't really hear what it said as I suddenly found my Pipbuck far more interesting. It had lights and buttons and switches and I had no idea what half the shit did but it made it that much cooler. This thingy could hold the answers to all my problems if only I could twist this stupid thing right.

Though I wasn't paying attention to their stupid conversation I did hear the term, 'Number Six' come up multiple times. And then something about restraining... unruly... I really should have payed attention.

Next thing I knew somepony had pressed a sweet smelling rag against my face.

And then blackness.

"Ehh..." my eyes fluttered open slowly seeing nothing but darkness.

Slowly I rose to my hooves. Only that didn't happen. What really happened is I tried to rise but thick leather straps kept my legs tied down making me accidentally smash my head off the table I was strapped to. I was just glad no pony else was around to see that sorry display.

No pony else...

Someone tied me down face first into a table and now they were nowhere to be found. In my experience ponies rarely tied you down without being somewhere close. You know in case them what they tied down tried to escape. Not every pony would consent to being tied down, and to be frank it reminded me of a forked tongue. Not something I liked thinking about. Ever.

I struggled with the leather straps my eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light. If my eyes were right I was in some sort of medical room. Rows of medical equipment lined the room. Had I any idea what any of there were, or did, I would tell you but lacking in such knowledge all that can be said is their seemed to be an abundance of tubes shiny eerily in the darkness. Either a medical room or a mad scientist's chambers. Or both.

"Oh." Light burned my eyes.

Squeezing them tight I slowly opened them to see it coming from a small lamp hanging from the mouth of a unicorn stallion. I gathered he was a doctor by the stethoscope around his neck. Slowly and deliberately he placed the lamp upon the table before turning to me with his small black eyes. No not black, but a deep grey it looked black. Not creepy at all.

He chuckled, "Yes. My eyes. When I was but a colt the other fillies and colts thought I was a demon. When I can they'd run from my presence." He smiled amiable which only served to make me squirm with my restraints more. "On the other hoof it served me well, for whenever I commanded one to fetch me a Sparkle Cola it was not long before it was in my hooves." He licked his lips at the thought.

"Why am I tied down?"

"To keep you from moving." He guffawed and turned from me facing one of the medical stands or something. "I kid. It is standard procedure for addicts. Some do not wish to be here, and sometimes it is better they are not given the choice." As he stood with his flank to me I could not help but notice he lacked a cutie mark. Or rather where it should have been looked like it had been burned.

"I am not an addict."

I gave my very best growl as I turned and stared straight ahead. It was the most comfortable position I could get without breaking the leather straps, and I wanted to save that for a climactic turn in the conversation. It was at that time I realized I was an idiot, and that I was actually in a blue tarp tent not a building proper. Most ponies would have noticed that much sooner.

"Do you know," He started turning his blue body to me, "what happens when alcohol and dash mix? It

doesn't react right away, but within the hour it takes two already dangerous chemicals and makes them deadly. Back in Eye Glow, young stallions and mares dared each other to take them together. Called it Ghoul Blood, said you felt like you could live forever. It'll get you higher than you've ever been, and then kill you. One time they found fifteen corpses around a bonfire in some abandoned building. You'll never guess how they died?"

Groaning, I slammed my head into the table. How the hell was I supposed to know that? He flipped his short cropped black and red mane at me. Classy. "Lucky your friend Flare was smart enough to tell us what was going on." It was his idea to take the dash. Just so I could... I could.

"Serenity!" I shot up so violently I tore two of the leather straps binding me asunder. The doctor took a step back chuckling.

"Impressive. The filly is fine. She is currently sleeping peacefully. You were lucky to get her here just in time. Very. She is such a nice filly, I remember her well from her time here, and she had a great deal to say about you. You knew Doctor Morowynd, did you not?" I nodded. "As we heard. You had suffered starmetal poisoning. A sad thing and unfortunately too common. Well, more common than it should be. "

"What?"

"No doubt you had not heard, but a few months before the great war a chunk of said metal had fallen just outside the city. The explosion took many lives, but it was covered up under the guise of a minotaur attack. No pony wanted to hear that the sky was falling in between hostile raids. So Mr Haygas reported lies as reporters are wont to do-"

"Mr. New Haygas?" There was no way it could be the same pony. New Haygas's voice was too damn amazing to be a ghoul's, and there was no other way a pony could live that long.

"Mr Haygas." The doctor corrected. "He was a DJ before the war, and his voice was famous. Since Dise came to be, many took up his mantle," He stopped before staring at me quizzically, "You really know nothing about this area do you?" I shook my head slowly wishing I had a sweet clue about anything. Ever. "I guess it doesn't matter. What matters is getting you and your friends right as rain. Now about what Morowynd wanted you for..."

"What is number six?" It came to me in a flash; memories of the night before. I remember them saying that multiple times.

He swallowed for a second. "It's... a code. Code six stands for a life threatening injury that needs immediate attention. Now, are you going to let me give you caps or what?"

I'm listening.

"When you were out we weren't exactly sure if the drugs you took were going to kill you. So we may have done some tests on you when we had the chance." I narrowed my eyes at him but gave him the chance to finish. If only because he did save Serenity's life. "Yeah. Sorry. Back where I come from there's a saying that: *time waits for nopony*. The tests were simple enough. It's just. You are very remarkable. There have been stories of ponies surviving exposure to starmetal for years, but all official records have them living three days tops. You're, well, the answer to a question."

“Thanks... I guess.”

“And we’ve arranged for a hefty transfer of caps to your saddle bag for being a good sport about our totally unethical practises.” Right whatever. All I heard in that sentence was caps, everything else didn’t matter.

I shrugged up at the blue pony and tugged at the remaining binds. “You mind?”

“Oh yes. You’ll want to see the filly.” I shot up again.

Serenity. Yes. I had to see her. And then make sure she had a home here. A place she would be safe from radiated water, crazy slavers, and exploding doors. So obviously a place not anywhere near me. As much as I liked the filly, my life was dangerous and getting worse all the time.

“Don’t break anything else please.” He chuckled. “Ginger, please come in here.” What kind of name was Ginger for a pony?

It wasn’t.

Ginger wasn’t a pony.

He was something. Instead of walking on all fours it stood on two almost goat legs like a griffin, if a griffin had goat legs. Its massive upper body and chest towered over everypony else in the room, and he seemed to have almost no neck at all and a tiny head with two huge curving horns. Instead of forelegs it had, arms, I guess, ending with griffin like claws, except with three fingers and one thumb. His whole body was covered with thick brown fur. It glowered down on me, and me even I seemed small in compared to it.

“What the fuck!”

Minotaurs.

I had heard about them. Many times in fact. One time in verse. I had thought they were just another gang of ponies. Trying to claim their namesake. Of course, I was a complete idiot. If I would have thought, would have asked, would have anything I may have figured out the mystery much sooner.

Apparently, before the war Caledonia never actually fought Zebras. Instead, they fought a war by proxy against the Zebras’ close allies known as the minotaurs. They were an illusive race that roamed the vast plains and deserts to the west destroying or conquering all they saw in a massive horde. No pony, or zebra (or buffalo, though to hear tell they tried their hardest) had ever succeeded in dealing with them before they started attacking Caledonia settlements. As the war pushed forth, the Zebras gave their allies megaspell technology, just as Equestria gave Caledonia. When Roam and Canterlot went up in green flames and pink smoke, Caledonia and the minotaurs too joined in the apocalypse.

After the war was different though, the Minotaurs had never stayed in one place for long, so the end of the

world did not affect them as much. They still roamed the West, though in smaller numbers, and have been harassing NCA settlements. There was a war, or something.

I'll be honest I started to doze off as the doctor got to this part of the lesson. Yes, lesson. He sat me down for a half hour long lesson about minotaurs before he let me see Serenity. Because apparently I was supposed to know and care about this stuff. Frankly, it really didn't matter to me if they found a way around memory orbs two hundred years ago.

The only part that mattered was the fact they had regrouped. And were massed at the Canyon Ridge Bridge, and controlling everything west of it, trading insults with the NCA. Apparently, they wanted to destroy Dise for reasons that made no sense. Whatever the matter they were apparently a threat to the city, and the only reason the city's warring factions hadn't torn each other completely apart.

"Thanks..." I mumbled rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. "Serenity?"

He perked up, his black and red mane nearly standing on end, "Yes." He motioned for Ginger to open the tent flap revealing The Watchers camp in twilight. "Huh. It was bright when I came in here."

I groaned and rose to my feet. It still would have been light out if he didn't stop every three minutes to recall a memory of his childhood. If you wished it, I could detail his entire foalhood. Not that I really desired to go through that again.

Ginger walked in front of us with slow unsteady movement. Like he was about to fall over with each step. Wherever he went ponies scattered. Subtly though, like rats scurrying away from being stomped, not running and screaming like fillies from a monster. Still, you could see how it annoyed him. Even if he never spoke. "A refugee from a minotaur camp." The red and black maned doctor explained, "He has vowed never to speak until his former comrades leave the Caledonian wasteland. Unfortunately no one else would take him in out of fear. So we did"

"How nice." I remarked blandly. It was getting to be a struggle just listening to what he said after that lecture, nevertheless caring. So instead I gazed upon the watcher camp.

It was. Not what I had expected. When Serenity excitedly explained them as healers, and helpers at all I was expecting grand hospital able to fit thousands of ponies. What was there was a large flat area of the city quartered off and filled with tents. Hundreds upon hundreds of tents filled to the brim with ponies of questionable integrity, and health. The blue tarp tents almost looked like a sea, or at least what I pictured a sea looked like from what I have heard of them. The largest and grandest seemed to line along the walls of the compound and seemed to be saved for the critically injured, or as housing for the doctors and nurses.

"So." I said slowly, fearing another verbal tirade as I walked beside the doctor, "This is The Watchers."

"Awe. Not always what ponies expect. We've grown a lot in the last few years. It was only this year, actually, that we started sending out caravans to tribal villages in the north-eastern hill-lands. It has not gone as we would have liked," his voiced trailed off in reminiscence, "but the Watcher does as the Watcher wills."

"Huh." Religion. Was this really a conversation I wanted to have with a pony that potentially had storage

lockers full of poisons. Apparently it was, as my stupid mouth kept moving before I had a chance to, ya know, think. "It's a religion now?"

He chuckled a bit before responding, and seemed to slow down as he led me through the maze of tents, "It is to some. We have no books, or sheets of prayers, or physical deities to dote upon, but it is something." He gazed upwards at the clouded sky. I was surprised he didn't not run into anypony the way he wasn't looking where he was going. Ginger may have had something to do with that though. "We believe that we were put on the earth for a reason. That the wasteland had purpose, and that somewhere we are being watched by something greater than our understanding. Something that wants us to *do better*. To *be better*. So that's what we do." Well that explains the name. Shame, I was hoping for something more mysterious.

"But I have talked too much," Ya think?

We stopped suddenly at an identical looking blue tent to the thousands of others. The flaps were closed but inside I saw like peeking through. "We're here." Serenity. Inside. It was just about time for a sappy reunion. I could hear the violins already.

"Hey." I said as the doctor and his Minotaur friend had already started to walk away. But he turned and gave me a impartial gaze with his dark eyes. "Who are you?" Maybe I should have asked that earlier when we first met, but hindsight is 20/20.

"Clean Cutt. I am the founder, and leader of the Watchers." And then he trotted off into the sunset without a hint of irony.

Whatever.

With a fluttering in my chest I opened the flap expecting the worst after what I put her through.

"HIRED!" She had her forearms wrapped around my neck as I felt warmth rising to my cheeks. "I missed you." How long had I been out? Another question I should have asked but did not. She pulled back from the hug; her grey eyes regarded me with warmth I did not deserve. "You Saved me! Again!" She giggled so much I had to wonder if she was on pain medication. But when I looked at where the wound was on her chest, it seemed all but healed with only a faint scar remaining.

Gently I placed her back on her bed as she kept talking. "Three times now. *Three!* I need to start keeping track."

"Serenity, I-"

"I was hoping when they fixed me up they'd add some robotic parts. Like a heart! Then I'd be a cyborg. Like you! Wouldn't that scare the pants off any raider."

"Serenity, li-"

"They didn't though. It's a real shame as that would have been *awesome*, so very awesome I stayed awake all last night thinking about it," Well that explained it. I made a mental note to keep my fillies rested from then on, "Well, mostly I stayed up hoping you wouldn't be mad at me-"

"Mad at you?" I had to stop there. Why in Equestria would she think that? It was impossible for me to be mad at a filly for more than five minutes, and trust me, I have tried. "No, Serenity, I'm not mad."

"Good. Once they give me a clean bill'o'health, we can leave and find a job with-" Perhaps I should have shared my plans. Told her why we came to the Watchers. To find her a home. So now it came time to break it to her, but I couldn't. The words caught in my throat, and my intestines twisted themselves into knots.

"You're staying."

She looked at me. I could taste the tension in the air.

"W-what. You don't like me?" I couldn't bear to look her in the eyes. This was... it was not supposed to be this difficult. She was suppose to hate me or dislike me. I sold her to raiders. For like thirty seconds...

"No. I like you." Words stuck in my throat. Again. Why couldn't I channel Smooth Tongue just for a minute. "It's that. Look at you." She stared down at her healing body, and around at the medical tent she had claimed as her temporary home. "It's not safe with me. You'll get hurt. You'll die."

"With you protecting me?" She said flipping her mane and dismissing my worries, "Never."

"You just got hurt." Or did she really forget what happened just days ago. "Nearly died."

"B-but. That was just a one time th-"

"And when you nearly drowned at the stable."

"Well." Serenity stopped her muzzle scrunching up trying to think. "y-you saved me. Both times."

"Barely." I sighed nuzzling her neck softly, "I'm not invincible. Or infallible." No shit. Yeah it was obvious, but I had to stop her before she started treating me like a hero. "I can try my hardest. But, shit happens. I can't risk you dying." Why did I have to be so sappy?

Emotions and I were... not close. I could kick down a raider without fear, but I didn't know what to do when tears started to form in my eyes. I couldn't kick tears no more than I could shoot my feelings. So I did what I always did and choked them back.

"I." She started and stopped for a second her grey eyes welling with tears. It was getting too much. "I want to be with you. I. I mean, I liked the Watchers. B-but. They never cared. None of them would have done half'a what you did." I felt a blast of warmth as she licked my cheek.

"I'm not a good pony." Not for the longest time at least. I worked for bad ponies and did bad things. Constantly, and I had no intention of stopping.

"No." At least she knew that. "B-but you aren't bad. You're..." Her muzzle scrunched up again. "...honest. I think. You do your... job. But you never lie about what you're doing... when the jobs done and you're on your own. You always do the right thing." A few times did not mean always. I promised myself to stay true

to my contracts, but I didn't always do the right thing when I was away from them.

"I. It's still too dangerous."

"I'm a *big pony*. I can decide that!"

Silence.

"Okay." I broke the silence, and with a word I turned her expression from misery to mirth. "But." I added before I could be bombarded with '*ohmigoshohmigoshohmigosh*' "You can't decide now. Think about the dangers. Then give me your answer."

"I alre-"

"No." I cut her off. "You haven't. When they say you are healthy enough to leave, then tell me." She nodded sadly and curled herself into a ball unable to contain a yawn. "You need to sleep."

That had gone not as well as I had hoped.

Turning I moved to leave back to my tent when I heard a small voice call out. "Hired. Could you. Sleep here?" I craned my head around and gave her my best smile.

After taking a few moments to move some junk off the floor before carefully lying down beside Serenity's bed. It was only a few seconds after closing my eyes that I felt something small and warm against my chest. I really didn't understand this filly. But that was okay. Sometimes you didn't have to know everything, you just had to know enough.

Wow.

That was deep. I'm impressed.

Being under medical sedation for a few days apparently made me more rested than I had thought. According to my pipbuck, I only napped for an hour before waking up to find Serenity snoring softly at my side. Sighing contentedly, I laid my head down and enjoyed the moments of peace. They were few enough. Of course, it didn't take long for my mind to wander and I started obsessing on how I planned to protect this little filly and still eek out a living. I couldn't stop doing the tough jobs, not when I had a promise to Wildfire I hadn't kept yet.

Depressing.

So instead I got to my feet, my metal leg humming ominously, before tugging the blanket over Serenity with my mouth. When I left the tent it there was darkness outside, well as dark as Dize ever got. Lights shinned in all directions like a thousand stars had wandered too close. Looking up at the tall buildings outside, I had to admit they're beautiful.

My gaze shot down when I heard screams.

I looked around at the sea of blue tarps. I know I heard screaming, but I saw nothing. I turned my head and saw somepony running away, their flank to me. Were they running away from me? I knew I was a cyborg technically, but I never expected I was scary enough to run away from.

So I turned on my radio, "...for the news!" Why did it seem whenever I turned on my radio the news was always on. *"Strange Reports from the Big 52 of what appears to be a pink ghost. More details as they become available. Well it seems two, and I use this term lightly, vigilantes have taken to duelling in the Dise streets at night. One calls herself the Batmare, while the other The Laughing Stallion. From eye witness reports, often they arrive at the scene of a crime scene at the same time and promptly forget to fight it in favour of themselves. I... There are no words. So here's some music."* Vigilantes. Right.

As I walked through the maze vainly trying to find the exit, I saw nearly no pony. Those that I did see took one look at me, and my leg, and quickly made themselves scarce. Only one pony stood to match my gaze and it was a cutiemark-less colt. He glared at me with something coming perilously close to loathing before a hoof appeared behind a tent flap and pulled him inside. Somehow, and I wasn't sure why, I did not feel welcome.

"Scariness' folk again, Hired? And here I thought detox would do you some good." Soaring out of the sky Flare landing in front of me looking... well looking really good. Don't get any ideas. I mean compared to his skinny twitching self from before, he looked healthy. His coat seemed bluer and fuller; his pink eyes were no longer blood shot and lacking in the bags as before. Hell, it even looked like somepony cleaned his mane.

"Looks like." I scanned the rows of tents seeing no pony.

"Yup, you're an idiot. Good things. Means I get to be Mr. Exposition and tell you shit like I'm an egghead or something." Flare had trick to speaking. He took a simple statement then added as many unnecessary words as possible. "Ya never heard of 'Celestia's Vision' have you? I don't suspect so, what with you not knowing much of anything, but they don't like cyborgs." I had heard of Celestia's vision, though I couldn't recall from where.

And I took offence to the term cyborg. I mean, I was, technically, one, but it still felt like a word reserved for lunatics what lost their soul. As far as I knew my soul was still intact. Then again the stigma of cyborgs losing their soul might be why these 'Celestia's Vision' whatever's did not look kindly on us limply-challenged.

"And." Oh, Flare was still talking. A look of disdain masked my surprise. "Them folk actually got their start in the Watchers here, so most folk here either are a part of them or agree with'em. And that means that they don't like the looks a you."

"You know this how?"

"Lived in Dise all my life, obviously. Only place the Remnants have a base after we got kicked out of the sky and what-have you. I wasn't no head commander or nothin', but everpony knows the basic run down of who does what and why." As much as it loathed me to hear yet another lecture, I wouldn't mind learning a few things. If Lucky wasn't pulling my tail, it was a dangerous city if you didn't know who ran it.

"Lets get out of here." The tension in the air was getting too thick. It felt like a thousand eyes were boring through my hide as we left.

"Fear."

We trotted side by side through the streets of Dise moving towards the centre fountain. "Every pony here is 'fraid." He flapped his wings for a second so he could gesture dramatically with his hooves as the plethora of ponies what swarmed the streets. "Ever since them NCA and Minotaurs, Dise has been afraid. Protests every other night, and when the Galicians send their ponitrons against them, they become riots. Mustangs fighting The House for control of the power-plant. I don't know what Molly and the Baises are doin' but it ain't good."

"They the four gangs you said?" He nodded. Four gangs of Dise each trying to vie for power and control. Not counting the Watchers, Minotaurs, NCA, or Steel Rangers.

"Yeah." He twirled around perching on one of the benches encircling the massive water fountain that acted as the city centre. "It's gettin' worse an worse. Rumours of a full-out gang war in the streets. Minotaur attacks, fears that the NCA will try to annex the city." He reared up dramatically mimicking the statue of the pony behind him. He would have done a better job if he had no wings. "Soon the streets will burn, or something. Mark mah words. It wasn't no mistake I moved outta the city... though the drugs weren't part of the plan."

His faced reddened as he continued, "But that's life. Anyway where was I? Oh yeah! Fear or something. Anyway ponies here like to drink and gamble to forget their woes for a night. Lets go to The Moon!" I knew that to be a casino. Sounded like a plan.

Before that I had to get a better layout of the city. The fountain did a good impression of a compass with four large streets pointing out in the applicable directions. North and south I already knew. Hotels to the north, hotels, the Watchers, and a jumbled mass of buildings to the south. So instead I looked down the western most street there was. Well nothing. It ended abruptly with the Dise wall cutting a building in half. Right. No way that's going to end up being important.

To the east there was a jumble of ponies getting thicker the further east it went. "What's over there?"

"Huh. Oh, you know, houses and merchants and stuff. Anypony what doesn't have enough friends or caps to live in the Cross," The Cross I am guessing was what Dise called the four intersecting streets. At least it was well set up in that respect, four streets cut the majority of the city into four blocks. Each block owned by a different gang. Had to wonder who set that up. "Well they go there and live ina hut. Worst part of town if you don't count Parasite Mount or Eastside outside the city. Still, best place to shop, hardly ever overpriced." He shrugged flapping over my head, "To the Moooooooon!" He rose dramatically before diving back and landing gently beside me.

Damn, I wanted wings.

"Why The Moon?" I asked keeping my head low as we started down the street. It wasn't like we were going to get lost with the huge water show constantly playing in front of it.

"It's the best fuckin' one. Sure The Alehouse has their little fight, but at The Moon everything is for sale." Sounded like a good marketing strategy. Maybe. I honestly have no idea what a marketing strategy is. "No drugs for me though. I can resist. Just got clean for fuck's sake, so don't go thinking that, but they got whores." Heat rushed to my face as he winked at me. I just kept my head low and kept walking and prayed it was too dark out to see me blush. "Stallions... well, Mares for yo-" Wait, what?

"Wait, what." I skidded to a stop. Mares? Wait. Did he really think I was a fillyfooler? Why the hell did everypony think that?

"Huh..." He stopped, looking embarrassed himself, "W-well, I thought. I mean the way you've been looking at the mares round here-" I was not! Dirty lying liar. "It don't matter. Stallions, like I said, though ain't so many."

I ignored him and kept walking doing my best to memorize the street.

"We're here."

I looked up sharply to see a pretty, dolled-up mare smiling at me. Oh Celestia, why? She winked seductively, and I felt blood rush to my cheeks all over again. Behind me, I heard that blue bastard laughing at me. Growling, I pushed passed the whore as she said, "You like it rough? So do I." I never answered and never bothered to look back at the water show. I resisted the urge to kick the door down.

"Hey there, doll," A handsome Stallion said behind his desk, "Welcome to The Moon. Where the naughty come to get punished," I could not have gotten more red. "We'll have to take your we-" It took me all of two seconds to unstrap my battle-saddle and dump it on his desk. I didn't really care; I just needed a drink.

"Don't get so worked up." Flare nickered beside me flapping his wings, "You're always so uptight. Take a load off." He opened the door from the entrance lobby, into the atrium. "This is the Moon."

The whole floor seemed dark enough to give the illusion of nighttime but still bright enough to see everything. Most of that light came from a fake half-moon hanging from the ceiling overlooking the game floor. Two dozen tables of games I had never heard of and countless slot machines were spread out evenly across the purple carpeted floor. Gamblers rolled dice and flipped cards as serving mares in skimpy outfit strutted about, their flanks swaying as they walked. On the far wall was a simple stage with a single pool. I looked over just in time for music to start blaring and a Mare to come out dancing an...oh. Um. Wow.

"Drink."

"Yeah yeah." He hovered off to a nearby counter. From the vague memories of the Bridle hope I knew what this was all about. Before we could play and drink we needed casino chips. Gamble with those and trade them for drinks. Or other things here I guess.

I followed after him and got a lovely set of multicolour chips. Obviously, I kept enough in my saddle bags for later, I wasn't stupid enough to gamble all my caps away. "You ever play craps before?" I shook my head. "Hah, it's easy."

After that point things got blurry. I remember a pretty mare getting me shots of whiskey. And the more. And then more. After that there was this vague sense of warm happiness. Scenes of gambling and caps. Kisses, mare and stallions. Someone telling me I needed to learn how to hold my liquor. The bottom of a toilet.

I awoke slowly cursing at everything I could think of. My head pounded like a jackhammer, and my stomach heaved when I tried to move. Something smelled like vomit and piss. It made my head hurt more. Groaning I opened my eyes. Why the fuck did I have to drink so much? Looking at the bed, I was happy to see at least this time I didn't wake up in some strange mare's bed.

I swear, I'm not a fillyfooler. Shut up.

"Hello." I didn't recognize the voice. Oh fuck.

I drew my eyes to the doorway where a large red stallion was grinning at me from behind a pistol. "Smells like you had a fun time. I-"

"Piss off." I buried my head into my pillow. "Your voice hurts." He snorted laughter.

"Clean yourself up." Fuck off. Does no pony get the message? "You spent too much last night." Ya think? I mentally added a note that red ponies like to state the obvious. "You owe us two thousand caps." I...wait. "You're broke. Even with the weapons we took. Until then, you work for us."

Like hell I was! I rolled off the bed ignoring the urge to puke and die of a headache. Only to fall face first. Blinking I realized my leg was deactivated. The red fucker was still laughing at me.

"Congratulations. You're officially a Mustang."

Footnote: Level Up!

Skill Note: Barter: 25

((First off I have to thank Kkat for creating this world I am abusing for fun and profit. And to my Editor ErrantIndy for being awesome and making this not, you know, suck. As well as to the folks at the FO:E Proto document, who are always there for support))

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