

Darkest Before Dawn

"Hope is what makes us strong. It is why we are here. It is what we fight with when all else is lost."

Shots rang out in the night.

As I huddled behind a flimsy piece of plywood, my daring escape collapsed around my ears. Mere minutes after the assassination, we were greeted by a red unicorn with a blue mane who had identified himself as Starscream. Oh yeah, and he had bitchin' cybernetic wings. He informed us that he was a liaison of Mr. House and I, along with my companions, were in some serious shit. Molly, you see, did not quite like me going back on my deal (in my eyes I broke no contract as it was a legitimate error on my part. I had fully intended to unlock the door... but she was not like to listen) and now had plans to death-murder me.

Whoops.

All this was made painfully clear when we tried to escape the city through the tunnel Flare had told me about that afternoon. We made it all the way to the statue in the centre of the city, we were even able to get east into the slums before we were set upon. And shot. A lot.

"I've faced worse," I said, huddling Serenity to my chest as shots blared out somewhere in the slums. Hiding behind a small wall in what appeared to be an abandoned house, and I use house in the sense that somepony lived there and nothing more, as it was smaller than my room at the Moon and consisted of a dirt floor and three walls. Safer than the street though.

"Yeah?" Serenity looked up at me. There was fear in her eyes, plain as day, but I knew she was trying her hardest. Being shot at was not for foals, and I knew well enough this was hardly her first time. Though the details were sketchy, at some point she had been captured and chained by ponies similar to our assailants, and I was determined not to let that happen again.

"Yeah." A story came to my head, and I started speaking before I started thinking. "Less then a year ago. In my old town. We were set upon by raiders in the night. Ten times as many as now." Her wide eyes looked at me and nodded. "Most of the town was captured in their sleep. Save for me and three fillies."

"W-what happened?"

"We won. Beat the raiders. Saved them all." Not all of them, but I could hardly speak of that. My chest tightened and I knew it was the worst story I could have told, because it had no happy ending. But it was a story, it was something not here, and she didn't know about the rope or death or any of that.

She smiled and nodded as the gunfire stopped. The story, for what it's worth, did the trick at least. So when it came down to it, I could never claim nothing good came of it.

Peeking out into the black maze, I saw nothing. When we had entered the slums, there were tiny lights in between cracks and through broken and boarded up windows. Now the lights were snuffed and voices silent. Was this a ritual perhaps? Shootings and fights were not uncommon in the slums, and no doubt every pony already knew to lie down and shut up when the bullets started to fly.

"Hey!" Flare glided down from a hole in the roof, landing gently before us with Bunker Buster resting on his shoulders. "Looks like we have fifteen or so on our tail." Not so bad. "Some of them are heavily armoured, and I saw at least one with a minigun." Fuck. I looked down at my bare chest and wondered why I hadn't gotten 'round to buying, you know, barding. Not to speak of the minigun, I saw what Mayhem did with one of those and I was not eager to be on the receiving end.

You know after killing Roy I'd expected the Mustangs to be out for my blood, not the Baisses.

"We should be able to-Watch out!" We should be able to what?

"Gotcha," somepony said.

Suddenly something cold and sharp was on my neck. Without thinking (shocking, I know), I grabbed the foreleg with both hooves and threw it with all my strength. The deep brown pony flew across the room crashing into the far wall. Serenity gasped as I realized that on its fetlocks was a pipbuck-like device, but instead of magical science it came with a retractable blade. I had just come really close to dying.

Leaving Serenity for a second, I trotted over to the groaning brown earth pony and cracked his skull with my pipbuck. I lowered my glare as I turned to Flare. "Take him somewhere."

"Got it." In a streak of blue, Flare grabbed the pony with his forelegs and burst up through the ceiling, taking special care to crack the brown ponies' head on the way out. A few seconds of steely silence later, there was a sudden shriek, and a dull thud. Following shortly after were shouts far to my right. Licking my lips, I helped Serenity onto my back.

"Be strong," I offered, "and be quiet." Serenity, to her eternal credit, narrowed her eyes and nodded.

I burst through the half-rotten door into the dark maze. The only light was the amber glow from my pipbuck illuminating the walls and stands around me, making the whole area dance with shadows. Above there was darkness, and beyond the glow of my pipbuck I could see nothing. My stomach tied itself into knots as I tried to remember the way to the tunnel. Behind me were the lights of Dise, so I must have been going vaguely in the right direction, but beyond that I wasn't sure.

Gunfire renewed my conviction, and I took off.

Shadows whipped past me as the rhythm of my hoofbeats overtook the sound of my heartbeat. That is to say, got very fast. Galloping, I crashed through a wall I didn't see until it was too late. Wood shattered into splinters and washed over me and Serenity, who squeaked but kept remarkably quiet. Inside the building, I took three steps, leapt over a terrified teal earth pony and his family, and smashed through a boarded up window head first.

Landing back on the slum streets, I barely broke stride, though my head hurt like a week of binge drinking. No time to worry about such silly things like brain damage though, as I started to hear hoof steps catching up on me. I weaved left around empty food stands, and quickly splashed my way through one of the many water fountains.

"Found her!" Fuck. Somepony was talking about me. "Follow the light!" Fuck again. I kept galloping as I glared down at my stupid shiny pipbuck. They were useful for radio and maps and stuff, but it being all

glow-y was going to get me shot.

There was a shadow following me. Across from me in another street. As I galloped, the gaps in the walls and building that separated us showed glimpses of my stalker. What was worse was that the two streets seemed to be getting closer together. I kept running though, and did my best to get ahead of my shadow. "Close your eyes," I whispered to Serenity, before turning and jumping.

Crashing through the wall that separated the two streets I landed on my feet and spun towards my shadow. Subtlety roared. My shadow was torn from her feet and sent spinning in a bloody mess from the shot. Behind her was a row of broken and shattered walls. Everything Subtlety touched turned to scrap, and I loved it. I turned my head back to nudge Serenity.

"I-I'm fine, we just need to-Watch out!" Not again, dammit.

My head snapped back the way the shadow came from to see four more ponies running two by two at me. I bit down on my bridle. This was nothing that couldn't be handled by a little tact and Subtlety.

BOOM

Argh, blinding light. The explosion hit my chest like a sledge hammer. Serenity cried out as the smoke cleared and the two ponies were gone. Buried and broken under a pile of rubble and stone that the explosion had turned the street into. Looking into the sky, I saw a glimpse of blue and red. Damn, that Bunker Buster was a beauty.

Suddenly weapons had names, that made perfect sense.

Thanking Celestia I had been far enough away from the explosion to avoid most of the shrapnel (I could feel a few scratches, but nothing so bad as a spike in the chest), I turned and kept up my desperate run through dangerous territory, wondering just how many more things were going to explode near me.

The answer was one.

Serenity saw the grenade before I did. Her pink magic illuminated it long enough for me to kick it away. The blast sent me face first into the ground and Serenity sprawling off me back through the dirt, and into an empty stand with the word 'apples' painted across it. Groaning I scrambled to my hooves and coughed out a metaphorical lung.

"Serenity." I called out to her. Her small pink body twitched and I nearly lost my lunch. Until her head lifted ever so slowly, and she smiled dimly at me. "You alright?" She started to nod.

And stopped halfway. Her grey eyes went wide as a rifle pressed up against the back of her head, casting her in a green glow. A similarly-coloured unicorn emerged from the shadows, grinning sadistically.

Fuck.

Overhead I could barely make out the form of Flare flying. He must have seen the amber light of my pipbuck as he did not fire. Not that it helped any, from all sides I heard shouts of confirmations, and ponies merging from all sides. The glow of their horns illuminated the small market. Blackened wood and

debris covered half of it, and the other half was ruffled by the grenades impact. No less than eight ponies surrounded me, and I did not trust Subtlety to be able take them all out without hurting Serenity.

"Well, well, well." Fuck that voice. "A rat caught in a trap. Poetic, is it not?" Molly said, walking out of the blackness, her hat tipped over her eyes. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you've caused me?" She stomped her hoof and glared at me, at least I assumed she glared, not being able to see her eyes and all.

"A lot?" I ventured.

"You have no fucking idea. Turns out the Mustang bugs are poisonous. Or rather their friends are. I have to wonder how exactly the Galicians knew when we were going to attack. If I recall that plan was changed last minute under your information. Funny. Don't you think, my little rat?" Actually I found that not funny at all, nor did I find her firing a shot a centimetre from my hoof funny. I really didn't care though, as I was using all my focus keeping eye contact with Serenity as she whimpered with the gun pressed to her skull.

"Hilarious."

"Tell me," she turned and pointed her gun at Serenity, "what would you do if I kept my promise? Killed your little bitch. I gave you the chance, I offered you a job and you were... well a rat." Her voice barely concealed her rage. "First you fail to do the one thing I ask, and now the remnants are claiming they have to break contract. They claim they cannot kill one of their own. So I have to chase you through these slums, and you just refused to sit still. How many ponies have died tonight because of you? Because you failed. To. Listen."

"Not enough."

Something hit the ground with a "plink" and a "tiss."

I started coughing from the stench before I realized what had happened. Smoke, smoke was everywhere so suddenly and so thick I couldn't even see my hoof in front of my face. Coughing more, I heard the sound of a hoof strike. A vague shape was hitting another to my right, but it vanished a second later and was fighting a pony at my left before quickly vanishing in a burst of magic (my shoulder confirmed that) and hitting yet a third pony. It was disorienting. I didn't waste a second and counted on the green mare to be the same place I left her. Subtlety roared, and I heard it slam through somepony with a screech. There was a tingling sensation in my shoulder, and somehow I knew it belonged to Serenity. Running forward through the choking smoke I lifted Serenity to my back, and got the fuck out of there as fast as possible.

The streets were as dark as ever as we suddenly continued the same way we had before. As we ran Serenity shouted into my ear. "What was she talking about."

"Forgot." I grunted, spinning around a sleeping bum who somehow remained unawakened by the battle. "About the door."

"Nuh uh." I skidded to a stop just so I could turn and give her my patented, 'what the fuck' face. She continued, "I unlocked the door. Like, when you were off doing whatever it is you do, I unlocked it as soon as I got up." Then why the fuck was it locked? Oh well, it meant I hadn't broken a contract even by accident. No clause in my contract to say it remain closed, so I was basically in the clear.

"Thanks," I said, looking around. Just in front of us was a large ratted shack leaning against the Dise wall. At the top of the wall I could see hints of lights, and almost the vague silhouettes of ponies patrolling it. Not oblivious to the fighting inside the city, just instructed to ignore it. "We're almost there."

I started towards the shake when a dark figure suddenly jumped before me from a nearby rooftop, gliding to the ground with a cape that looked eerily similar to a bat's wings. I readied Subtlety before I realized the pony was unarmed.

"Are you unharmed?" The mare was decked in an outfit of navy blue and purple with a deep black bat-cape and a mask (that did nothing to hide her horn) that seemed to make her ears stick up like a, you guessed it, bat.

"Yeah." I stuttered before turning to Serenity to confirm. She nodded ever so slightly, and thus I returned to our caped crusader. "We're good... thanks."

"Worry not, citizen. It is all in a day's of work for THE Batmare." She puffed her chest out and brought a hoof to it as a sudden wind blew her cape dramatically. "Be more careful. The forces of evil ar-" A chilling laughing reverberated throughout the slum. "By Walkkirk's ghost!" She turned dramatically to the side. "The Laughing Stallion! You will not escape, scum!" Suddenly she vanished in a flash of light, leaving us wondering what the fuck had just happened.

"Are you coming?" Flare asked, suddenly hovering above us, his red jump suit torn. You know, he had worn that thing since I met him, but I'd never realized. He just never took it off so it seemed like a part of him, and passed right over my vision. Until it was torn, that was, then it stood out like a sore thumb.

"Did you see that!" Serenity asked, planting her fore legs on my head and pushing my mane into my eyes. "That was a superhero! A real live superhero! It was so cool! She saved us."

"I saved you," Flare said, spinning upside down to smirk at us. "I saw her patrolling and told her civilians were being mugged. Hell, I even carried her over." He flipped back, landing on the ground. "Basically you owe me." Now that was a change.

"Fine." I started towards the shack when I heard shouting behind me. Dammit, why couldn't they just take the hint! "Run!" I shouted, galloping as fast as my legs could take me. Slamming into the door full force with my shoulder (ouch), I tumbled through the other side in front of a trap door.

Good thing for this convenient trap door. Mind you considering the massive tunnel system in Dise it wasn't that lucky. Especially if it actually was haunted. Hah.

"Flare." I called out poking at the chains locking the door.

Zippering over he kicked the chains away, "Already took care of it when you folk were running. Earth ponies are slow."

"Funny," I said, helping Serenity off my back. "Should have been watching our backs."

"I did!" Flare protested. "Saved your ass with a perfectly timed superhero." Serenity squeaked something

but I didn't hear.

"Right. We shouldn't have been caught in the first place." I said, as Serenity squeaked again.

"Well if you would have run fa--"

"The Door!" Serenity screamed. With a kick the door slammed shut and I smiled at Serenity. She just sighed and walked away.

"Flare." He beamed at me. "You're right. Get the thing." With a laugh he reached into my bag and set something up in front of the door.

Opening the trap door, I beckoned Serenity and Flare down the stairs it opened to, and started walking down myself when the door swung open. "Finally!" Molly growled stomping in. "Trying to scurry little rat. Do you really think you can escape?"

"Dunno." I took a tentative step down the trap door stairs into the tunnel. "Do you think you can? Ass."

Beep.

Looking down, she saw the remote mine at her feet.

"Shit!" She turned to her gang that was still rushing in. "Out, out, get out!"

BOOM.

Okay. So maybe waiting until the last second before getting out of there was not the best idea.

The shockwave sent me spiralling down the stairs in a heap, just in front of the rubble mind you. Despite my stupid last minute decision for an epic one liner, the explosion worked well in three ways. Firstly: it blocked off the route in case they felt like following us. Even if they wanted too it'd be difficult, Second: it may have incapacitated or killed Molly, and her gang (not killed -- she was going to come back to bite me in the flank), and thirdly: it proved just how badass we could be.

On the other hoof, it proved Flare right, as he insisted that we buy the mine earlier that day. That could set a dangerous precedent.

I stood up in the dark. "Everypony alright?"

Serenity's horn lit up, and with it I could see the pale figure of Flare standing up. "I'm okiey dokiey." Serenity said as Flare nodded an affirmative. I tried to get a grasp of the situation. The tunnel was similar to the one under Parasite Mound, but it lacked a few key things. Mostly, it was completely dark, devoid of the pale lighting from the other tunnel, as well the floor was concrete instead of grating, implying that this was a side tunnel, not the main tunnel. Most importantly, however was the fact this tunnel was much worse-kept. I had previously thought that was impossible.

Also, my pipbuck light! It was not on.

For fuck's sake. I broke my pipbuck. When I bought the damn thing, the trader claimed nothing short of a direct lightning strike would deactivate it. Figures, the amber light nearly got me killed outside, and now when I needed it, it was completely borked. I brought the stupid thing to eye level I tried to fix, but of course I couldn't see shit in the darkness. Thus, my fixing consisted of my smashing at it with my cyber leg.

"Stop it," Flare scolded. I looked up at him and rolled my eyes before starting to smash at it some more. This worked to solve its clicking problem before. Logically, it had to work this time too. "Idiot. You really have no idea what you're doing do you? Its so bloody simple a child co-"

Serenity reached up and touched a button.

Suddenly the hallway was a glow in amber light. As I gaped at the light, Serenity chirped, "You turned the light off." You can turn the light off! Or on! What the hell, how did she know how to use my magic-tech magical technology thingy better than me. This was. Argh.

I sucked at technology, and was a cyborg. I was a walking talking contradiction.

"Okay." I said sitting on my haunches staring at the dim amber world. "How do we get out?" I turned to Flare and he just sort of shrugged. Lovely.

"Well there is a way. Ain't never been here on account of the ghosts." Just as he said that, something creaked somewhere in the underground complex. "Heard stories about it. Ponies getting lost. Old walls crumbling and the dead coming to life." Flare kept talking even as Serenity had started taking shelter under my legs. "They say the last pony to venture into these tunnels went mad, and found jabbering to himself in the darkness a week later. Ever since, the tunnel has been closed so only the ghosts may wander its halls."

"Serenity." I rolled my eyes and stroked her mane as she shivered, "Flare's just trying to get you going. Ignore him. He's an ass." She gave the slightest of nods as I returned to my feet. It was time for one of those plan thingies I was so good at.

My light didn't give me all the illumination I would have liked, but it was better than nothing. The tunnel was long and dark and dirty, but it seemed mostly clear of debris. Directly to my right and left were two doors, though the one to my right was boarded up by wood with something scrawled in red above it. Ignoring those options I chose the 'walk forward until you reach something' option.

"Lets go."

As we started walking, wind whispered through the cavern, and for a second I thought I knew what it was saying.

"So," Serenity said not a few minutes later. The walk was so far tedious and sort of dirty, but had been peacefully quiet. Nothing but the whispering of the wind to calm my mind. "Know any other ghost stories, Flare?"

"Yeah." Flare had kept to walking in the dirt like a regular earth pony. No doubt because the hallway was far too cramped for any of his usual aerial manoeuvres.

"Wait," I interrupted with my usual grace, "I thought you didn't like them?" I kicked an empty can down the hallway. Its tinny ting echoed through the hall, and Serenity eeped at the unexpected sound.

"Well." She squirmed on my back some. "Sometimes it's really fun to be scared."

"Right. I'd rather you not." I rolled my eyes. I'd rather she not get scared and then run off or wet herself or something. Not that either of those things were very likely, I wanted to cut the chance of them down to zero. You know, as a rule.

"I've got a story!" Flare zipped in front of me, a grin on his face. I kept walking though, so he was forced to float backwards. I wasn't about to stop for such foolishness. "Its the horrifying tale of the giant, uptight ghost, who never let anypony have any fun!" That didn't seem like any ghost I've ever heard.

"OoooOOooooOo!" He waved his hooves in front of me.

Serenity giggled on my back, and it was then that I realized what had just happened. Mocking me like that could not go unanswered.

"Well. I know... the... uh... scary story... about a ghost... who was annoying."

Nailed it.

Since Serenity was laughing even harder, I knew I had achieved ghost story victory, so I rightfully pushed past Flare and strode forward. For about three steps.

Creak.

Never good. I kept walking, completely oblivious to the huge cracks in the stone underhoof, and the way it wobbled under my weight. I took two more steps.

Crack.

Fuck.

The floor crumbled away. With nothing under my hooves, I started falling. Without thinking, I reached out. Dimly I was aware of Serenity being plucked off my back. My flailing forelegs slammed into something. My heart racing, I could barely see until I stopped, jerking my head into my throat.

I was hanging on; just barely. I could feel myself slipping as I looked at Flare and Serenity. They were lying on the non-collapsed floor breathing heavy but mostly alright, though Serenity's mane looked frazzled and I thought I saw a hint of blood on Flare's wing.

"Ow." I groaned.

Without a second thought Serenity ran over and started pulling on my hoof. It didn't help much but I favoured her with a smile. "C'mon! Get up. We'll getcha out! C'mon Flare!"

Kicking my legs uselessly as Flare slowly moved over I remarked, "By all means. Take your time." I was only hanging on the precipice of... of something. Looking down I saw only blackness, and heard only wind. Wind that sounded suspiciously like growling.

"I'm trying." Flare grunted as he pulled at my leg. Was his wing supposed to have a hole in it? "You're heavy."

"Thanks." I grunted, trying to drag myself out of the pit. Ever so slowly I inched forward. Growling, I could feel a piece of steel rebar stabbing into my gut like a stabbing pain thing. As I slowly climbed out of the pit I could feel it drag against my chest, cutting into it. When it reached my saddlebag strap I heard a snap. Suddenly I was lighter... fuck!

As fast as I could, I reached down with my metal leg trying to grab my saddle bags. All I managed to catch was the hem of my dress as it fell out of my bag, with the bag in question falling into the abyss. Somewhere below me I heard growling, a gnashing of teeth, and a tearing of... something.

For some inexplicable reason, I no longer wanted my legs dangling in the pit. With all our combined strength, I managed to crawl out. Out of all my supplies, all I managed to save was the one thing I didn't want. This dress was haunting me, I was sure.

I regretted ever thinking this tunnel was a good idea.

We walked back the way we came. Serenity had patched us up as much as she was able, which was not much considering nearly all our supplies were lost with my saddle bags. All we had left was my Celestia-damned dress, Subtlety, and whatever Flare had in his bags. Serenity had to resort to tearing Flare's red jumpsuit in order to make a bandage to wrap his wing in. Turns out being stabbed in the wing by a broken piece of steel hurt. Who knew?

My side stung as we walked, but I kept quiet about it. It was nothing I couldn't handle, and chest injuries were hardly new to me anymore. If I'd had a healing potion or Med-X, I would have taken it in a second, but without the option I would live.

It did not take long until we made it back to our starting point. So you know, excellent progress.

"Which door?" One was barricaded by wood, and the other not. It didn't really matter which one we chose, as we had no idea what went where, only that we were to open one and try to make our way out of this dank dark place. Serenity pointed at the barricaded one so I walked over to it.

The barricade was strong, but it still took me only a single buck to slam it open. Bringing my legs back down they felt a little numb, but I got over it and walked through the door. Waving my pipbuck around the room I got an amber interpretation of what the room looked like. Strangely enough it looked sort of office-ish. Shrugging, I started forward.

"Spread out. Flare, go with Serenity. Look over that side, and I'll look over here. Try to find a way forward." Serenity's horn sparked with dull pink light and she nodded gravely at me before walking off, Flare in tow.

I waved my pipbuck around periodically to see, but it did not help as much as I would have liked. Shadows danced as I weaved through rows of tumbled and broken desks, and I hit the end wall before I even realized it was there. It was not a large room, and next to nothing in it. That was, until I saw a green glow out of the corner of my eye.

A working terminal. I trotted over ignoring the reek of something nearby. The computer looked cracked and dirty, but despite everything it was actually on, casting my face in an eerie green glow. Licking my lips for a second, I bent over and pressed a few buttons with my nose, hoping to find a map of the complex.

"Work has continued slowly in the eastern suburbs. A few local communities have formed groups and are protesting to the mayor. They claim the tunnels are a secret Equestrian project. Our boys managed to convince them it was not Equestrian in nature, but it was a tough sell. Regardless of what they do we still need to finish the tunnels... if only they knew. Its not my concern though. Wallkirk wants the tunnels done, and it will be done, but we will need more security. Can you send some?"

Swift Star"

I clicked forward.

"Fr yu baby? Nt a prblem. Gt sme new stallins waiting for a chance. Just say when and where and they'll be there. Tell Wallkirk I'll send the cheque in the mail, and he wn't regret chsing surefire security."

Surefire Waves.

P.S. Srry, my '0' key is brken. Need t yell at tech supprt. ll"

Wow. Could that get anymore boring. Lacking anything more interesting to do I clicked to the final saved email as a strange wind whispered in my ear.

"Weekly Report: After the riot last week no significant protests have hindered tunnel construction. Of the planned lines only two have yet to be dug, and the main line is fully furnished and operational. In accordance to the increased violence on the western front, as well as in new information received from our Equestrian partners we have increased our schedule to be done by the new year. However, our former Security Contract, Surefire Security has suddenly cut all ties with the project. We believe it is due to the package you sent in last week for storage. We are currently exploring legal options on Surefire Security, and I will give you a full report when the papers have been filed. In the mean time I have attached all relevant documents regarding our contract with Surefire Security, as well as our updated timetable. Thank you for your time, Mr. Wallkirk."

Swift Star"

Welp, that sure was an interesting read. Turning back, I thought I felt that breeze again. Following it through the amber glow of my pipbuck, I came upon a door. Obviously, I opened said door. And nearly fell.

The door led to the hallway, right where the floor had given way. Groaning I took a step back cursing my luck when I heard a shout.

I knew the voice.

I ran through the office sending, shelves and desks out of my way, stopping only when I saw the dull light of Serenity's horn. And the ghoul standing in front of her. Its mouth wide open, and dripping saliva.

Subtlety took the beast in the shoulder, spraying Serenity with gore, as the ghoul spun and fell. Not waiting a second more, I rushed over and held the foal in my legs. "It's okay. It's okay." I said, but I was more thinking about where the hell was Flare.

"Get... this thing off of me!" Not three feet away, Flare was struggling under a second. Damn these things. Throwing Serenity onto my back I tensed my muscles as Subtlety fired again. The ghoul flew into a wall at the impact, making a bloody mural.

"Thanks." Flare squirmed to his feet, his eyes still wide. "There's more!" Following his hoof I saw them. More than a dozen of those... those things shambling out of a hole in the wall. More than we could fight.

"Run."

Out the door, and across the hall. We went through door number two and slammed it behind us. Without thinking, I grabbed the nearest thing I found, a filing cabinet, and threw it across the door. Then for good measure me and Flare pushed a desk in front of it too.

"Everypony okay?" I asked, leaning against our barricade ignoring my aching side.

"Y-yeah." Serenity nodded. I didn't believe her. Considering the fact she was visibly shaken, close to tears, and had blood splattered over her pink coat and mane (the mane was more of a guess. Given the way red was splotched onto her yellow mane normally, it was hard to tell), I was going to assume she was just trying to be tough.

"Fuck no." Flare whined. "My wing is all stabbed, and that ghoul nearly bit me! To top it off I think I'm starting to go crazy and hear things! It totally sucks dude, fuck these tunnels. I can't fly."

"Well." I groaned, getting to my feet to survey the room. "All the more reason to leave." Somehow.

Yeah, I was worried. My heart was pounding, and my stomach felt like it was trying to tighten itself into a ball, but I ignored it. I brought us here with a filly, so it was my job to be brave. Even in the cold darkness where the wind whispered names to me. Even when we were chased by zombetic freaks, and we were out of food and healing potions.

The room was dark and stagnant, similar to the one before, but it seemed longer, and my pipbuck light was not nearly as strong as I would have wished. I took a single step forward. Into a pile of bones with a crunch. Twisting away, I had to shake my leg to get the bones off of me.

It was not all a loss though as beside the pony remains was a single 12mm pistol. "Flare." I said before lifting the weapon up and tossing it to the pegasus. "Catch."

The blue pony caught it easily as Serenity came strolling up. "Is that..." She poked the bones and gasped

a bit, stepping back. I could see her already pale coat getting impossibly paler. "A pony?" Shit. I really didn't want to traumatize the poor thing. In fact, I wanted her to stay at The Watchers. Even as the easy excuse came into my head I dismissed it; I choose to bring her into an uncertain and dangerous situation and nopony was to blame but myself.

"It's..." I struggled for the words. "A Pony." I admitted. "A brave pony. Who died here two hundred years ago. Just like those ghouls, they were ponies once too." What could I say but the truth. She knew very well ponies died, and there was no lie to say. "All ponies die. Even Celestia." They weren't comforting words, I could see that plain as day when she looked up pleadingly at me. "But we aren't dead. And so long as we can walk, we can survive. It is good to feel sad for death." I wiped a tear from her eyes. "It means you are a good pony."

"I'm sorry." She sniffled. "I'll be strong."

"You are strong." Cheesy I know. "So just keep being strong. We have a long way to go. And I need you to be strong. Because you're a big strong pony. And I need you to keep Flare from being scared."

"Yeah." She smiled a little. "Flare is a wimp."

"I am not!"

...wake up...

The wind whispered in my ear. I knew that the wind could not actually be saying anything, but it was doing a damn good job convincing me otherwise.

Looking around me, the dark walls pressed in on all sides. My pipbuck turned every object into a shadow and my movements made the shadows dance and mock me as I walked. Were I a younger pony, I may have been frightened. But there were more frightening things in this tunnel than shadows and imagination.

"Find anything?" Serenity called just outside the door.

I'd stumbled upon a small office room and was desperately searching for something. Anything. I was hoping, honestly, to find a few .50 caliber rounds and a half dozen healing potions, but instead found papers and pencils. The only thing of interest was an audio-log. Hoping it'd provide a clue as to how to escape, I stuck it in to my pipbuck.

"...Don't trust him." One pony said to which another replies.

"And why not?"

"Ever since his crew took over for Surefire things have gotten tight. Ya know? Course ya do. And then I hear he sits all day staring at that orb and barking at anypony that disturbs him. It ain't right I say. And then there's..." There was a shuffling and the second pony said something I couldn't hear. *"They say he records everything. Hidden cameras. Recorders. I just... don't feel safe. I'm going to tell Swift Star I'm*

resigning tomorrow."

"If you're sure." The second pony said. "*Just stay safe dear.*"

"I will mom."

The recording ended and once again I got nothing useful out of it. I was starting to wonder if these recordings and emails were just set up to piss me off and confuse me.

"What was that!" Serenity said needlessly loud as I returned from the office.

"Nothing." I shrugged. We were still stuck in the long office we used to escape the ghouls, though we had made it to the far end. We had also found a few more corpses, but Serenity was strong and pushed past, while Flare ignored them as nothing new. Scavenging around we had managed to find a few useful things: a bottle of water, a vial of med-X, a bottle of wonder-glue, and (strangely) a second pistol. I took that one for myself. Subtlety only held eight rounds I already used two, and all my ammo was lost with my saddle bags.

...Silver Storm...

I found myself jerking and searching for the voice. Stupid Silver. I knew it was the wind, but... it sounded so familiar.

"Yo. Earth. Earth to Gun," Flare said, waving his forelegs in front of my face. I swatted at his hooves. "Welcome back. What was that?"

"Thought... it doesn't matter." I pushed passed him. "Think I saw a door over here." I trotted slowly across the room trying to clear my mind. This place was just... getting to me. I thought I heard Flare say something about 'going crazy' but I ignored that too.

There was, in fact, a door in the direction I was heading. Clutching uselessly at the handle was the skeleton of a unicorn. Sighing I kicked the bones away with a rattle. I could hear Serenity squeak behind me, but I chose not to address it. I figured she was trying hard enough in a bad situation and pointing it out would have been counter productive. Or something.

...You'll be late...

I shivered as the wind whispered again. Dammit Silver, just ignore it. Shaking the thought away, I turned back to the door. Illuminated in amber were the words: "Run. Escape. Do Not Sleep, The Voice." written in what only could have been blood. A sudden burst of rage took over my and I shove my metal hoof into the door. With a crack and shower of splinters, the door and message were turned to firewood. Luckily, before Serenity could see it.

"Mom." Her voice was a hushed whisper. So light I wasn't sure who she was talking to. Even still, I walked up to her.

"Serenity. What did I say about calling me that?" Her grey eyes blinked for a second as she turned to me. Something creaked somewhere and echoed throughout the building sending a shiver down my spine.

"I..." She wasn't talking to me. Of course she wasn't. Nope, just hearing words on the wind.

... Actually. Why was there wind at all? I mean weren't we under the city in some Celestia-forsaken tunnel? How could there be wind at all? My body tensed and I swallowed. If it wasn't wind...

No. It had to be the wind.

"C'mon," I said, my head tilting towards the broken door. Somewhere off to my right I saw something. Without thinking, I turned and moved to strike... only to find Flare twitching his nose in the rubble under a desk. "Flare. C'mon." His wing twitching, he stuck his head out.

"Found diff." He mumbled around the magazine in his mouth. Really, I was not sure what I was supposed to do with that. Flipping his head the comic unravelled. On it was a surprisingly well preserved picture of orange coated mare with a comically large sword in her mouth.

"Canterlot Comics Presents." I read out loud, "Sword Mare And The Revenge Of The Windigos..." I raised an eyebrow and just shook my head. "Keep it if you want. Maybe Serenity would like it..." Honestly, wasting my time on something so silly was just... silly.

"You've never heard of Swordmare? When I was a little buck I used to love her, figured she'd be your idol or something." I basically ignored him and walked back the rubble of the door, and body beside it. He kept talking. "She was awesome. near the end of the war she traveled through time and fought Steel Rangers, but lost and teamed together to purge the Zebras. Seems silly to me, if you ask me, cause she could'a won with a simple Spark Pulse Emitter."

Walking into the hallway, I shivered. It was the same one we started in, though from the looks of it we had cleared the section that had collapsed, meaning we were finally able to continue. Yay. So we had made progress and only had a few serious injuries to show for it. Across the small hallway was another door, and it was a toss up between trying the door or chancing the long hallway that liked to drop me into pits. Either way there was a high probability of failure and pain.

...Marigold will be angry...

She can wait five minutes.

Fuck.

This was too much. "Somepony choose," I said sitting on my haunches, exasperated. The wind was driving me nuts, my side was stinging like a bitch, and I hadn't slept since my surgery however long ago.

"Oh! I choose!" Serenity ran up in front of me and made a show of rubbing her chin with her hoof. She gave a good half-second of serious contemplation before pointing dramatically. Running over, she jumped up to the handle of the door on the opposite side of the hallway. With a click and a whoosh the door swung open.

Revealing a mouth full of sharp teeth.

Serenity shrieked. I blasted away with Subtlety, but being as I was sitting the bullet embedded itself uselessly into the ceiling with a shower of pebbles and plaster. As I scrambled to my feet the ghoul was moving too fast, its mouth clamping around Serenity's leg. There was blood. And a scream, and I just wasn't fast enough.

There was a blue blur. Flare's hoof moved so fast I could barely see it, and the zombie pony let go. The pegasus grappled with the zombie, trying to push him away, only for more to appear from the doorway. Slamming the zombie-ponies head into the wall Flare stood his ground, though with one hoof fiddling with his battle saddle.

Subtlety fired, and a whole row of Ghouls found themselves with a large hole. Nudging Flare, I grabbed Serenity and tossed her on my back as gently as I could and ran the fuck out of there.

The ghouls followed. Their corpse-like bodies couldn't run as fast as Flare or I, but fuck did they try. Even still Ghouls never tired, I was pretty sure. So even as we ran forward, flashing past broken and barricaded doors, we would be caught. Eventually. Or... actually fuck that. We would *survive*. I didn't just go and piss off and escape from a city of gangsters just to be killed by some mindless ghouls and their creepy wind.

Through their moaning I heard something. The wind returned. Serenity sobbed quietly on my back and I tried to focus on her but I couldn't. I kept hearing the damnable wind.

...Silver... come back to bed...

Ignoring it I galloped on, and on. My side stung, and my legs grew sore, but I refused to stop, not so long as I heard those beasts behind me.

...don't leave me... I've been waiting...

Against my better judgement I looked back, though I kept running. Through the dull light of my pipbuck, and pressed behind the mass of ghouls and shadows; I saw her. A red figure glowing in the darkness. My heart leapt and I stopped. I knew in my mind it couldn't be, but... but it was.

...I knew you'd save me... quickly...

I don't remember taking Serenity off my back. But as I charged the ghoulish horde she was no longer there. It didn't matter though. I had to get there. To her. Discord himself wouldn't have been able to keep me from her. It's been so long, but I knew she had to be alive. There was no other option, for there she was. Tears stung my eyes, because the Goddess' had given her another chance and still she came to me. So, I charged towards the red figure so far away, my gun cleaving scores of ghouls with each shot. Blood flew through the air like red rain, but it meant nothing to me. Only her. It was only ever her.

Then my world became fire.

Coughing I found myself on my back, groaning from the force of the explosion. In the flames above me Flare stood. His saddle blazed and fire erupted again hitting me in the chest like a kick. "What're you doing!" I screamed trying to get to my feet. "Wildfire!" Through the smoke dust and flames I couldn't see the red. She was dying, the explosions they must have-

SMACK

My cheek burned from Flare's hoof. He glared down at me. "Get a hold of yourself! What the fuck, whatever you're seeing ignore it!" Behind him I saw the red pony. I nearly pushed him away. Struck him. Killed him. I could have if I wanted to but he kept yelling. "Serenity is back there hurt and scared and you're chasing ghosts. They aren't real. This place is fucking with you, and if you listen you're letting it win."

Survive.

Behind him the the red pony twisted and faded into the wind. It was never there.

"What do you see?" I asked, staring down the long hall. We had managed to escape what ghouls Flare didn't blow up, and even found the main tunnel (I figured from the larger size and grate similar to the one under Parasite Mound). Staring down one side I saw the red figure again, perpetually out of reach.

"My mother," Serenity said slowly, resting against me. When we had entered the main tunnel we had lucked upon a healing potion on the corpse a long dead pony. Though Flare was far more injured we had decided to let Serenity have the potion, because, well because she was a filly. She tried to protest, of course, but the bite marks on her legs were deep and painful enough she had to limp. In the end, she wasn't really given a choice in the matter.

We had to rest though, or the visions were going to drive us mad. Madder. So we stopped and laid down when it seemed the ghouls had left us alone, and together we stared into the darkness playing the 'hallucination guessing game'. It was Serenity's idea: instead of worrying about the words and images we talked about them, assuring ourselves of them. Reminding us they weren't really there. Moreover, she explained, it was fun.

"Knew it," Flare said leaning not far away against a wall. "What was she like?" Flare, so far, had been really good at guessing.

"I..." Serenity scrunched up her face. "I don't remember. Well I do. It was just a long time ago. She used to sing for me, and somehow she always smelled sweet." She glared down the dark hallway at whatever it is the tunnel made her see. "She said she was coming back, but never did. Bad ponies got her." She stomped her hoof and buried her muzzle in my chest. "I can hear her singing." Apparently, the game was not as fun as advertised.

"Flare's is a mare." I guessed quickly, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, long time ago. She was the sweetest little thing, though I can't remember her name I remember the face." Flare sighed. "Didn't know her a month before we were talking about getting married. She was Earth pony though... my sergeant didn't much like that. Strange." He didn't bother looking at me. "She turned up dead later that week. Until now. She keeps smiling at me."

I closed my eyes and tried my best to be anywhere else. I succeeded. A warmth flowed over me and I had the distinctive feeling of being tucked under the covers. There was a vision and a memory and

suddenly I was cuddled up beside somepony. A cold wind whipped through the room, chilling me to my bones. So I moved closer. The sensation of touching somepony was so genuine I was swept up in it. Even as she started to... oh... My eyes snapped open with a blush on my cheeks. That was not the sort of thing to daydream with a filly near by.

"What about you?" Serenity looked up at me, innocence fresh in her eyes. "What do you see?" Wildfire. I blushed just a little bit more.

"Wildfire." Flare said trotting over to us, "Least that's what she said when I had to knock her block back there." He grinned at me. "A marefriend?"

"A friend." I insisted forcing back my blush. "She was a good friend. Died when I did something stupid. I don't want to talk about it."

"Aww come on." Serenity tugged at my ear with her magic. "We told our stories. Its your turn."

Words could not describe how much that was not happening. "Nothing else to tell." I slowly got to my feet, and looked around. "Flare. How many grenades do you have left?"

"Two. Won't do us much good if they get the jump on us." Not unless we had a death wish. Still he was doing better then I was. Having wasted all my .50 calibre ammo in my suicide run against the horde, I was left only with the pistol I scavenged (and I wasn't even sure how many rounds it had in it), and my metal leg. Though it was a good thing Flare's grenade launchers were able to be modified to fire straight on instead of just down or we'd be really screwed.

"Lovely." I said helping Serenity onto my back before waving my pipbuck around. The amber light helped just a little in getting out bearings, but the darkness only waned a little. There was so much I couldn't see, but needed to in order to make a smart decision. "Well." I pointed down the main hall. "Those... vision thingies." A red figure smiled through the darkness at me. "Coming from there, yeah?"

They both nodded.

"Well. I propose not going that way." Serenity nodded just a little bit, while Flare looked a bit apprehensive but agreed. Turning my head towards the other side of the main hallway I said, "And that way is blocked." It looked like a cave in but I wasn't really sure. "Which leaves." Across from the door we entered the main hallway, was a similarly shaped door.

"Onward."

Through the door was yet another decrepit hallway. I was shocked. Truly.

...Don't leave me...

It only took a few steps to run into the first corpse. A fresh one. After commanding Serenity to close her eyes I leaned over the body and gave it a once over. It looked to be a ghoul, and its security barding (Safe Bet Security; Always a Safe Bet) showed not signs of impact. It didn't look like a natural death though, the way the body was just lying there. Touching the body, I started to search for goods.

"No."

It spoke!

I jumped back and gasped at the thing. It kept... talking. "I... escaped. Yes finally. The door opened. I escaped."

I kicked the body. Hard. It didn't react. It just kept mumbling and sleeping. I kicked it twice more with my metal leg, but nothing happened.

"Welp." Flare said jumping over it and turning to me and Serenity. "I guess this would be a perfect time not to sleep then?" Of course I had to yawn just as he said that. None of us have had a very good sleep schedule the past few days, and this realization only helped to make me sleepier. To my right a red vision passed, but I pushed it back to my mind. "This reminds me of a time."

We moved around the pony and kept walking.

"Back when I was just old enough to join the training corps." My eyes scanned the tunnel: every single crack crevice and stain to keep my mind occupied. "We went on a mission to deal with the minotaurs on behest of Flankyard." Smearred across the wall was a deep brown stain. "Training corps was only there to watch you see, as the real Remnants worked. Managed to set up a meeting with the Chairman of Flankyard and Minotaur tribal boss guy thingy." As we passed over a scrap of paper on the ground I took a second to read it. *...orb from the mountain. Mr Walkkirk says...* We passed by and it didn't seem interesting enough to stop for. "Well during the meeting, the monsters poisoned the tea. Some sort of sleeping powder." Something was in front of us I could see vaguely from my pipbuck light. "Well luckily I caught on an-"

"Dead end." I interrupted Flare. He glared, but nodded when he saw the crumbled rock blocking our path. We could have climbed over it, but I didn't want to risk it. Instead I opted for a safer route.

"Lookie! A door." Serenity pointed, and was quite correct. Luckily enough, there was a door to our right. "We can go through it, then I want Flare to finish his story."

Inside I thought I saw something. Actually I knew I saw it, but just pretended I wasn't sure.

"C'mon." I pushed away an empty desk. The room was large and when I waved my pipbuck above my head I couldn't even see the ceiling. "There has to be an exit." No there didn't. In fact I was almost completely sure there was not an exit nearby at all. Still, I kept a slim smile on my face and led my little group through the huge room. What would anyplace need with so many desks?

"Wassat?" Serenity pointed to something on the wall to my left. Turning, I could see a simple wooden door with a spray of holes across it. Seemed like as good a guess as any so I trotted forth, ignoring the shockingly close pleading face of Wildfire.

Following her pointing hoof, we came upon a small door riddled with small holes. Opening it we came upon yet another small office, though this one had a lovely accessory: the bones of a pony slumped over a mahogany desk with a shotgun beside it. Also there was a bloodstain on the wall, and desk. "Stay here," I said.

The first thing I did was throw the shotgun to Flare, in hopes that he actually knew how to use it. I had seen unicorns use them on occasion, but mouth firing just seemed far too difficult, not to mention painful. A filly back in Marefont once had one kick back so hard it flew from her magical grip and cracked another's head right open. If nothing else I supposed it could be used as a bludgeon.

...Is it bad?...

Gently nudging the skeleton onto the floor with a rattle I rummaged through the desk. Additions to my inventory were as follows: 24 pre war bits, 2 bottle caps, one warm bottle of sunrise sarsaparilla ultra (now with radishes), a single shotgun slug, and (how exciting) a piece of paper with gibberish written on it.

Not your usual confusing gibberish that was hoof-picked to confuse the hell out of me. This was special grade-A gibberish. Top of the line. I figured it was basically rare and worth a lot of caps. On account of how little sense it made. It quite literally said:

"49:20:68:61:76:65:20:61:20:63:6f:6e:66:72:69:6d:61:74:69:6f:6e:20:6f:6e:20:74:68:65:20:6f:72:62:2e:20:57:61:6c:6c:6b:69:72:6b:20:68:61:73:20:62:65:65:6e:20:61:20:62:75:73:79:20:6c:69:74:74:6c:65:20:62:6f:64:79:2c:20:69:74:20:73:65:65:6d:73:2e:20:50:69:6e:6b:69:65:20:77:69:6c:6c:20:77:61:6e:74:20:74:6f:20:6b:6e:6f:77:2e:20:43:61:6e:20:79:6f:75:20:73:65:6e:64:20:61:20:74:65:61:6d:20:64:6f:77:6e:20:41:53:41:50:3f:20:54:68:61:6e:6b:73:2e"

Rolling my eyes at the ridiculous note, I looked up.

There was a sound like rushing water, and then everything turned grey. My eyes darted around the room, and somehow it looked new. Like it did when it was first built, only without colour. A colourless pony burst through the door and its mouth flapped at me but I heard nothing. It handed me the note, but gasped and turned around. Two more colourless ponies burst in brandishing weapons of magic. On their chests were the words "Safe Bet Security". Their guns flashed and the pony who gave me the note fell in a shower of blood. I screamed.

I fell from my chair, and Flare and Serenity rushed onto the room. "Are you okay," Serenity asked quickly before giggling at me lying there on the floor.

"Peachy." Only going insane, no big deal.

Groaning and getting to my feet I smirked at Serenity before returning to more lovely black underground office building thingy. Shadows and wind were there to greet me, which were as bad as crazy ass visions so I cantered on casually.

There was silence as we walked. I don't know if the others were having the same feeling as I was, but I'd this feeling of being watched. My skin crawled, and the visions of Wildfire flashing around the room at random did not help. With each step forward I felt my stomach tightening up. I smacked my dry lips together and kept my head calm as best I could. Between the winds whispering in my ear, the visions, and the tingling sensation on my coat it was really hard.

Then I saw her.

It took all of my will power not to run to her. That charcoal grey filly staring up at me. That poor little thing me and Wildfire found in the mountain village. That poor thing.

Shutting my eyes, I refused to think of her name.

Closing my eyes was a bad idea. Suddenly my senses were barraged by a memory. Warm night outside Marefort. Eating food brought in by newly arrived traders. Sweet smells and laughter as we started tried to teach Fo-that grey filly how to play soccer. It was a good day. Heh. A good day, it had been so long I forgot what it was like. I don't know how long I stayed in that place, so long ago, but it was far too long.

"HIRED!"

My eyes shot open and I was alone.

Flare was gone, Serenity was off my back. Serenity's scream echoed throughout the room, but I could see nothing. Until a pair of red eyes was suddenly in front of me. Follows shortly but a grinning muzzle of sharp teeth.

My hoof cracked the beast in the face as it lunged for me. It howled and fell back but charged again. This time I used the metal hoof. Blood seeped down the beast's mottled flesh as it fell to a knee. I finished it. Every so slowly it toppled over, its brains seeping from its skull and onto the floor.

"HIRED!"

...Silver...

I followed the voice. Serenity's voice. Leaping through a broken wall I found three more monsters ready. They tried to rush me, but I really was not in the fucking mood.

BLAM BLAM BLAM.

With three shots of my pistol, all fell over, their blood splattered across the room. More groans followed but I pushed past and ignored them. They could fucking try to catch me.

They did.

My flank was burned, and I bucked wildly. The beast took to the air and crashed through a desk behind me. Looking back, I saw blood flowing down my flank from a bite wound just above my cutie-mark, turning it and my whole leg red. I winced in pain as I tried to move, but I heard a wordless scream echoing through the dark. So I kept going even as blood flowed from my new wound.

I could hear. That's all I needed. Follow the voice. As long as she kept screaming, my pipbuck would light the way, and Serenity didn't even have that, so I couldn't complain. I just had to save her. Light blinded me from the right as an explosion blasted out.

I guess I could save Flare too.

I charged towards the explosion. Serenity needed saving, but it'd be easier with Flare's firepower. I didn't

like it, but dammit I had to. The first ghoul's head snapped hard to the side as he was flung into the wall. The second was stomped to death, and the third I kicked ineffectively as Flare had already shotgunned it to death. Throwing down his presumably empty shotgun he looked up at me. His coat was dark with dirt and dust, and his jumpsuit was in tatters.

"Hired!" he screamed, rearing up. "What happened!?"

I panted as blood soaked down my flank, "You. You tell me."

"You just. Stopped for like five minutes. Wouldn't respond. Tried everything and then.. something leaped out of butt-fuck no where and grabbed her!... I tried to give chase but these zombie fuckers..." He shook his head and flapped his wounded wing. "Can't do shit. Everything fucking hurts." He grit his teeth. "When I close my eyes I see things. Just for a second... but everything is going wrong and it's hard..."

Just lie down and sleep. Be with Wildfire and the filly for the rest of my life. I would be lying if I said there wasn't something inciting in that thought, but... Serenity still needed saving. And no matter how realistic a dream is, it is never real.

"Tell ya what. Once we get out of here. You can sleep for a week."

He smiled grimly at me. "Yeah. I'd like that. I'd like it a bunch." Stretching, he strode forward. "We better get go-"

"HIIIIIIIREDD!"

We ran.

The voice was getting louder and there was... a feeling in my shoulder that was not like anything I'd felt before. My shoulder did not burn like it did usually around magic, more like it stung. Kind of like being shocked by static, but constantly. I followed the sensation, and the pain only got worse as we moved.

I stopped.

"Flare." I grunted. "Need the Med-X." Without wasting a breath, the vial we found earlier was out of his pack and injected into my shoulder. Just like that, the pain washed away, leaving a dull feeling in my shoulder. Just enough so I could follow the magical presence to whatever was causing it. Something horrible most likely.

We happened upon a door. On it the words, "Security Chief's Office: No Admittance." On a scale from one to ten, I gave exactly zero fucks about what that sign had to say. With a buck, the door was broken down, and I found Serenity.

If only that was all I found.

The room was large and spacious with no furniture except a single marble-looking pedestal. Upon it was a small sphere, no larger than a billiard ball that pulsed with.... With something. Whatever it pulsed with, I could feel the magic it expelled in my shoulder. Even with Med-X flowing through my veins, I could feel it like a bolt of lightning. Celestial incest, what was that thing?

"No. No no no no I was so close." Seven were already in the room. Serenity was lying on the ground, bleeding heavily as six ghouls circled her: five normal ghouls, and a much larger ghoul wearing security barding (Safe Bet Security Chief). He still had wisps of a green mane hanging around his horn, and a bloody knife floated in his magical grip. "Wallkirk said. Have the soul, have the orb, have the ponies. Mine all mine, he said. Need a filly, I heard it. All I need. You're ruining everything! Get them!"

The five ghouls charged, and I prepared myself for a fight.

That never happened. Suddenly Flare glided in on his broken wing and kicked one ghoul in the head. The second was wing slapped, and a third was headbutted. "Hired!" He grunted trying to fight off too many ponies at once. "Save. Your daughter." He bit one in the neck and twisted before turning back to me, his mouth bloody. "I got this."

...Don't go... I need you...

Suddenly Wildfire was right in front of me. Not a ghostly apparition like before, but as real as the last time I saw her. There was a fluttering of eyelashes and I melted. I felt a flush of warmth across my whole body as she leaned over to kiss me. Then I ran right through her to Serenity without a second thought.

Two of the ghouls Flare was engaging broke off and broke my line of sight. Something happened to them, as a few seconds later I walked over their broken and bloody corpses. Even dead and feral, they should have known better than to get between me and my... Serenity.

Before that ghoul bastard could touch her again, I kicked that sonofabitch in the head. There was a crack, and the green-maned ghoul fell to the side, his knife spinning and clanging off the concrete floor. I ignored him, and wrapped my forelegs around Serenity's bloody body. Sweet Celestia, she wasn't moving. "Serenity," I said softly. Vaguely I could hear Flare's pistol firing behind me.

"Serenity." I bit my lip. It wasn't supposed to end this way. She was supposed to live. Why did every pony I like have to die on account of my stupidity? I never wanted any of this. I just wanted a peaceful life. A simple life. "Serenity... please." Flare was right. I could just close my eyes. Fall to whatever magic haunted this place and I could live in peace. I nearly closed my eyes, when she opened hers.

Those sad grey eyes were the most amazing thing I ever saw. Reaching up with a timid hoof, she wiped my cheek. "Your face is leaking...."

Pain blinded me.

Suddenly I was on my back, my pistol spinning away and Serenity hitting the floor.

"No, nononononon! She IS Mine! I must have her." I gasped for air, as my shoulder burned, and Subtlety dug painfully into my back. "You! You are supposed to listen gogogo to sleep my little pony. Go to sleep and let me in. Wallkirk said-he said I could be in control. Then then you ponies fucked it up. You bombed and died and now I am so close. The *mountain* calls soon I will be there, don't you see? Ccaaaan't you feel it. They call and all I need is a filly. I have the soul." His horn burned with a green fury as I wheezed for breath but found nothing. Slowly my vision started to fade, and everything was dark.

I struggled, and squirmed but the darkness was too much. Each second I felt myself dying a little bit more under his grasp. Everything hurt so much. "Yes. Sleep. Feel it. Close your eyes and become mine, you will... you will." I was. As much as I didn't want to I felt the visions coming back. Wildfire and the filly whose name I would not say. Everything was dark. "Yes. Yes you will di-

BANG

Sweet air flooded my lungs. I gasped, my eyes shooting open as the pony fell on me. The room was back, and there was light. In front of me, standing over the body of the dead pony, was Serenity. Grasped in pink magic before her was my pistol, still smoking.

She was crying.

Flare stumbled over and wrapped a wing around her. A few seconds later I was there too.

"I... I killed him..." she sobbed. "I... I don't wanna hurt anypony... I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I-i didn't mean it. I-i don't want to be a bad pony. I didn't mean to... but... but he was hurting... and I just wanted to stay with Mommy." She was sobbing into my chest, staining my coat with tears and blood.

"I..." I didn't know what to say so I just held her. The first kill is always the hardest.

"Sometimes good ponies do bad things to survive," Flare said. "He was a monster, Serenity. A monster about to kill your mommy. It's... it's not something you should be proud of," he nuzzled her, "but you did the right thing."

"B-b-but. I." I sat there and let her cry. The only sound was the was wind whispering and the sobs of the pink filly until eventually her eyes were still and she looked up to me. For all the time I had known her, her eyes had never looked sadder then at that moment. "I'm sorry."

"No. I'm sorry," I said holding her tight with my one good leg. "I never should have brought you. Too dangerous. It's my fault.... You should go back. To the Watchers."

"But..." Serenity smiled so sweetly at me behind the tears, "who would protect you?"

I chuckled a bit, but not so much. Everything still hurt.

Serenity, I was glad to see, was not as badly hurt as I'd feared. The knife had cut deep on her ribs but hadn't punctured a lung or major artery. Scavenging Flare's jumpsuit for more fabric, we created a bandage for the wound, before we finally got to address the real problem.

That crazy stallion was, well, crazy. Dangerous, mind, but just a crazy ghoul who lost his mind two hundred years ago. Whatever that orb was, was the thing really causing the tunnel to go crazy. We had to address it, if only so our final escape would be that much less shitty.

Helping Serenity onto my back, I took a look at the pedestal, and the orb. "These tunnels. How far down do they go?"

Flare shrugged. "Very."

Walking up to the pedestal I ignored the orb, and instead looked at the wall and inspected it. There was a huge crack running vertically along it, and another matching one on the floor. Pressing my ear against it I could hear wind. These tunnels went deep underground, or so I was led to believe, so I had to hope it'd be far enough.

Walking back to the door from whence we came I carefully avoided the bodies. Had Flare really taken out four ghouls with an injured wing and half full pistol? I made a mental note to give him mad props later. We turned and faced the orb. I could hear it whisper.

...I never wanted this... for either of us...

BOOM

The force of Flare's last grenade shook the room with fire. When the smoke cleared, the orb was gone, and a huge hole was in its place. Slowly but surely, the wind faded, and I heard no more whispers. When I closed my eyes, only blackness reigned. When I opened them, the light of my pipbuck made shadows dance on the wall and put a smile on my face. This was the way it was suppose to be.

"I can see it!"

My whole body ached, and my eyes pleaded for sleep. How long were we trapped under Dise? How long had it been since I last slept? I wasn't really sure, but I was sure it was all about to end soon. We had found stairs. Stairs! After having managed to fight our way through the rest of the ghouls, we had found the exit. So many ghouls, I had to wonder how many other ponies died in these unfinished tunnels. This Wallkirk fellow had been trying to save Dise, but he had failed and doomed so many to death and an eternity of un-death. Well, I guess he had tried.

We reached the door. Was this really the end? I could see the faintest bit of light between the cracks in the door, but part of me couldn't believe it. Taking stock, it was hard to imagine we survived. Flare was suffering a punctured wing, and more bites, scratches, and lacerations than I cared to count. Serenity was carrying fresh emotional scars and a deep cut on her chest that made her whimper with each step. For my part I had a long scrape across my chest, a chunk of flesh missing where I was bit, and the distinctive possibility my brain was scrambled from the choking.

Just what I needed.

With a hard kick the door swung open, and we were free. I took a tentative step... just as Flare rushed past me basking in the air. "It feels so good! For fucks sake, look at the sky! Yesss." He looked almost silly standing there in his ripped up jumpsuit, but I had to smile.

"Freeeee," Serenity squealed as we emerged.

The door was a simple wooden door attached a cliff-side just under an overhang. Looking to the west, I could see the wall and the tall buildings of Dise. Not as far away as I would have liked, but it didn't matter much to me as I lay there on the ground. Serenity hopped off my back, just so she could lay beside me.

"Going to sleep." I grumbled. "For a thousand years."

I didn't though.

Thank Celestia for that.

Something caught my eye to the north. When I turned there was a light. Spears of light suddenly stabbed through the cloud layer like giant fingers. The line spiked south faster than I could follow and split off in all direction like a spiders web. "What is...," Serenity mumbled when it happened.

The fingers pulled apart, and the spiders web broke. Blue sky appeared in the cracks as the rays of light pulled the clouds apart, and then a golden light washed forth, so bright and powerful it hurt to look, yet I could not look away. Within seconds, the fingers pulled and the web was gone, leaving a great swath of the sky rich with blue. In the centre was a golden orb that cast its light across the world.

I started to cry.

For there upon the sky, I had seen the face of Celestia. After so long... the goddess was returned. The sun had been brought back and I was basking in its warmth.

"Hired...," Serenity looked up at me, tears of joy upon her face. "What is it?"

"The sun." I wiped the tears from my eyes and held her close as Flare chuckled.

Of course a pegasus would have seen it, but he smiled too. How could you not? Everything. Everything was going to be all right.

"Flare," Serenity sighed, resting against my chest, "tell us a story."

"I got just the thing!" In a flash he whipped out his Swordmare comic and started reciting it, describing the pictures as he went. He told the tale with such gusto even I had to laugh. It was a fun story. A silly story.

A story meant for a time of rainbows and sunshine.

Footnote: Level Up!

Quest Perk: Dancing With The Devil: You've traveled to hell and back, and are no worse for wear, gaining +15 health and +5 rad resistance. On the other hoof, the memory of your journey still haunts you, and sometimes you are sure the winds whisper in your ear...

((A/N: Here is the part where I give a super big props to Kkat for creating this world I get to toy with. As well as to my editor theBSDude, and special pre-read Mint Julep, who also draws for me. Without these lovely ponies, you would be reading trash. Now you're reading slightly better trash, huzzah.))

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