

"Mist Directions"

True North is sometimes hard to find

Our endurance was tested, the weather worsened, and even without any snow, the cold front moving in froze all standing water along the wreckage we followed.

Any worry that we would get lost was dissolved by Keena's tracking ability and the obvious path left for us by the Roamer, a straight shot through buildings that once stood as hollow husks now resembled half-collapsed tunnels. Any obstacle was swiftly knocked out of the way by the Macitaur's massive hammer and explosive charges, saving us time and eliminating any detours. On straight aways, Standtall picked up speed, half dragging the wheezing Macitaur behind him. Occasionally, I worked up enough mental cognition, since I didn't have to walk, to generate a medical spell. **Renewed Vigor** was one of the simplest in my repertoire to use, and it made sprinting miles at a time or flying long distances much easier.

"Ah feel loch Ah coods stomp radge yerd foo'ever!" Boomed the minotaur, his dunced goat companion flapping from his tail like a ragged flag.

"Good," I muttered under my breath, "*Now he's not wheezing anymore.*" If only I had a 'silence is golden' spell--Shutting him up would spare my brain from having to try to understand him.

Something that should have taken any one of us an hour took a fraction of the time, yet any kind words of encouragement were peppered with blatant vitriol. Keena was the only one among us with nothing but kind words to say, and in kind, no one said ill of her other than me, of course. It must be nice being a wet blanket.

We had distance to cover, and between stops to blast holes in blockades, the males found time for idle banter. Somehow, Standtall had found a subject that caught even my interests. "What is a Macitaur doing so far from their home?"

He confided in us that he was searching for a clan, it was part of his pilgrimage into adulthood. He had to find culture and comrades, learn a proper trade, do some soul searching, then return home a weathered minotaur. I don't know what was more absurd, the fact that Macitaurs did not consider demolitions a proper trade, that his goat partner was able to help him translate his speech into 'Common Folk Lip', or that he chose Detroit of all places to travel to.

“Chose a crap place for soul-searching,” I spoke with a snort.

“Aye, perhaps ye right, controlled dit in thee, tois, a body!” Said Angus as he dropped the plunger connected to the dynamite. The air filled with debris and smoke with the eschewance of an old restaurant that had collapsed into our path. I always wondered what Swamp Water Casserole tasted like, as advertised by Gator Bite, the cajun style eatery depositing itself in ruins about us. “Noone’s ever returned frae a pilgrimage tae th’ rot. Aam plannin’ oan bein’ th’ first.”

“Baaaaahaaaa!” Bayed the spotted goat as it picked up the plunger rod and began chewing on it fervently.

“Right,” I muttered softly. “Got the bar set pretty high.”

“Och aye, daein’ weel mah third day!” Angus sounded proud.

“Bah!” The goat bayed.

“One limb down in three days is ‘doing well’? Are you delusional or just stupid and optimistic?” Standtall must gargle nails to sound that stern. Seriously, his voice was virtually galvanized. “We’re getting close to Big Top, we need to steer East to avoid getting caught.”

Angus scoffed dismissively.

“Detours take time, which is something we ain’t got in abundance!” I countered. “We kin run like hell and hope nothin’ made it out of the lockdown.” It was a gamble, but I knew that once the Blok closed its gates and the perimeter defenses turned on, there was no way in or out. We’d shut the gate behind us, and that irritating pink robot said that the gate would not be able to open.

“You don’t understand,” He insisted, refusing to budge an inch. “It’s not the Deadmare.”

An echoing boom shook the earth.

“Damnit Angus, stop screwing around with your hammer!” I snarled.

“Dorn’t look’it me!” Angus excused himself, holding up his exhausted plunger. His hammer was drawn across his back in its sling.

Then a dozen more earth shattering sounds followed. Keena flew up higher to get a better view of the situation.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

“It’s Big Top!” Keena yelled, “It’s being hit with artillery! I can’t tell where from!”

“Don’t worry, I know where from,” I deduced, gritting my teeth, “Code Black, right?”

Standtall didn’t budge an inch, steady and still while the world rocked around us. “I’m surprised you know that,” Standtall coolly replied. “When a settlement gets overrun, this is the measure that has to be taken. Allowing it to exist just gives Hades a new launching point to take other settlements.”

“What about survivors?” Keena said, landing down roughly.

“We’re the survivors, Keena.” I reminded her, “But you!” I raised the barrel of the Compensator and brought it down onto his helmet with a resounding ‘**DONG**’! “What gives?! You called Code Black on my home, you ass-magnet!”

Standtall growled, his head dipping from the hard impact, “Your home is gone, Gangrene.” The blasts continued. Northside would keep shelling the settlement for sometime, until nothing remained but a war-torn crater. “It had to be done, for the good of the city! Don’t you understand, this is war, and we’re losing!”

“You idiot,” I grunted, “Call it off!”

“I can’t.” Standtall replied. “Comms are down.”

Code Black was the guaranteed death of a settlement, it meant that the Steel Rangers decided a settlement could not be saved, regardless of the state it was in. Just a reported sighting of a Deadmare at a settlement was enough to condemn it in some cases, a horror that Greenvale Heights nearly faced when Steelgraft had shown up at their doorstep. Fortunately, stipulations were in place, hacked and collared units were a grey area, and typically, as long as the hacked unit was turned over upon request(See: Demand) the settlement would be spared. Few settlements were well defended enough to be immune to the whims of the self-interested Steel Rangers. As with every Code Black, communication with the settlement and all units in the surrounding area had been severed until bombardment concluded. It was hard to keep shelling a settlement if the survivors had radio contact with you and were begging for a cease-fire, the silence was to insulate the artillery grunts and their superiors from ethical implication.

Sticking your hooves in your ears didn’t excuse you from taking responsibility, in my opinion, they were still murderers in my book. I and others like me coined a term for those willing to avoid active deployment by taking the soul-crushing job as Artillery-Operators. We called them the **Firing Squad**. Necessity was the mother of all cruelty. I always argued the necessity of leveling an entire city block to slay what might be no more than a dozen Dead Mare. In the case of Big Top, however, I digressed, it may have been a necessary evil.

Nothing was ever Black and White anymore, and teetering on the fence was getting to be a tiring balancing act. I just wanted to throw my chips sky high and see what side they landed on.

Bitterly, I bit my tongue, condemning Standtall silently. I wanted to scream at him, to angrily strip my provisions from him and walk. My emotions were far cry away from where they needed to be--My head needed to be in the game for the long run. For now, we needed the Steel Ranger, as much as I loathed to admit it. I’d find the first opportunity to be rid of him after tonight, if any of us survived.

“You’re not the only one that lost something,” Standtall said softly. His squad had been in there, or at least their remains had been. There was no time to carry out the dead, all were abandoned. The wounds were fresh, I abandoned a crate full of woe at the doorstep of that town, and now, they’d be nothing but ash. No one, not even Hades, could hurt them now. Standtall was right, he made the right call. He’d never hear me admit it, but I had the decency to drop it.

“Get moving,” I muttered, my mouth dry like cotton. “We’re not taking a detour.” He was going to see the bounty of his actions. So would I. The sound of booming artillery dogged every step, drowning

out the sound of hoof falls and wing beats. The smell of pony ash in the air, ever present in Detroit, was now a thick soup, a meal all its own. Standtall was spared the coughing fits thanks to his armor's filtration systems, but eventually those were overwhelmed. We came within a block of the old mall, the haze of heat baking off the shattered structure drove away the cold.

The closer we came, the more I wished the cold to return, to distract me from the shattering quakes rocking my body and the worry of misfire. The Artillery Grunts were known to send a payload wide. By the time we passed the mall completely, the shelling had stopped. Keena offered to survey the surroundings for movement of any kind. I didn't think she'd find anything, but she did, carrying somepony in her talons.

They were an earth pony, badly burned, bleeding, and likely deaf from the shelling. My ears were still ringing, too, and I had some buffer distance. The hippogriff was concerned about the pony she'd found, and under the ash she wiped off him with a torn piece of rag, starting at his face and moving down over his shoulder to their flank. He was a gaunt, sickly, and malnourished thing with purple fur. His bloody, black mane stuck to his face and one of his ears had a perfect bite mark in it. His cutie mark was a pickle jar, meaning he could have been a vendor at Big Top. I didn't recognize him personally.

"Keena, we don't have time!" I growled, having assessed his injuries. They were beyond what a 'quick fix' of a potion could cure. She was supposed to be scouting, not bringing back another problem! The hippogriff gave me a cross look before she went back to fawning over the stallion. She'd already upturned a potion to his lips, wasting half the potion before I could seize it with my magic and replace the topper. "Damnit, Keena! We'll come back for him later!" That was an empty promise, I expected him to die from exposure, another "oh-well" of the wasteland.

"What if we don't come back?" Keena argued, snatching for the bottle and wrestling it against my grip. "He needs help!"

"More help than we can give." Standtall added, "And we have no provisions to spare."

My mind went blank for a moment, in shock that I'd taken the same stance as Standtall. I grit my teeth, mentally kicking myself as I let Keena take the potion. No! I was not about to agree with him, even if I knew he was right! I'd spare a potion just not to agree with the bastard.

"I knew you were a good pony," Keena chirped before popping the cork and helping the stallion sit up to quaff the rest of the potion. My teeth ground hard as I stared daggers at her; that wasn't it at all!

The stallion coughed, sputtering as he fully came to, his eyes fluttering open. The last few dregs of the potion ended up rolling down his chin and onto his chest, wasted. “Hey there, don’t worry, you’re safe now,” Keena consoled the startled stallion. The churchmouse began to unload her frock of her rations and medical supplies, giving him no less than half! She was trying to give me an aneurysm! That’s it, Keena was banned from holding onto any supplies!

“That was generous of you.” Standtall hummed, “Offering aid to an enemy.” My mouth opened to ask what he was on about when I spotted it; the only item on the stallion’s person was a single torn muffin cake box. I’d made a mistake.

“Oh, for the love of...” I groaned, slapping my forehead hard with a hoof. “Keena, he’s a raider, he’ll find a weapon n’ go round robbin’ folk n’ killin’ em too!”

“Like you, Gangrene?” Keena countered, leaving me disarmed. Didn’t she know what I did was different? I robbed merchants too dumb to travel with caravan guards and killed raiders, not random travelers--Well, okay, I did all that, but I never really--Well, okay, I killed them if they resisted, but what I did was totally different! I had the decency to not eat my kills!

Before I could correct Keena’s mistake by turning the purple pony into red mush, he had skedaddled with all of Keena’s supplies, darting right between Angus’s legs. Seems he had the sense to realize he was unwelcome.

I gave Angus a mean look. “Why the buck didn’t you stop him?!”

“Coz 'at was funay tae watch.” He rumbled with a careless shrug before bursting into laughter. I was surrounded on all sides by idiots!

“What a waste,” Standtall muttered.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?!” I shrieked, tearing at my mane.

“I know precisely what I did.” Keena spoke with a sharp, defiant tone. “I saved a life.”

My rage was held back by my puffing cheeks, my muzzle scrunched as my mind processed the stupid drivel leaving that hippogriff's beak. "This is why I hate working with you!" I blurted. "We needed those supplies! Do you even care about us? Standtall's with me! Back me up, Angus!"

"Th' lassie did whit she thooght was reit." Angus shrugged, trudging onto the beaten path. "What's dain is dain."

"See, you can't understand a word he says, but he totes 'grees with Gangrene!" I figured, flailing my good foreleg at the air. "Next time, shoot the raider!"

Keena took a step back, looking at her talons, "I am sorry. I care about you." She sighed softly, "Next time, I promise, I won't let us lose any more supplies." She made a show of crossing her heart with a single talon and made a motion of sticking a something in her eye.

"What?" I huffed at Standtall, "Do I gotta stick a cap in you? Mush!"

Standtall merely sighed as he worked his way back into a heavy trot.

There were limits to what a scout, a demolitions expert, a lightning bruiser, and a medic could do, and we found our limit at the mouth of Nommage Valley. From here on, there was no trail left by the Roamer, and no evidence of where to go.

"Well," I grunted, "Where's those amazing tracking skills you boast about, Keena?"

"I need to fly higher to get a better view," Keena chirped, shooting me a cross look. "Try not to argue too much, would you?" Her request was directed mostly at me, but was met with a heavy rolling of eyes and snorts from all of us.

The hippogriff disappeared from sight to find a heading. She had to contend with rolling fog, coming in from the Eastern harbor that settled in the recessed bowl of Nommage Valley's industrial park. Good luck seeing anything through that fog, even I doubted Keena's eyes.

"Would you mind being more subtle with that infernal grinding?" Standtall finally complained.

I didn't even pause, rubbing my rump back and forth over his armored back. "I'm just tryin' to get this assplate warm again," I half-lied, biting my tongue piercing. The whipping winds were frosty, and I was the only one not wearing anything, so I had to keep warm somehow.

"I can hear you panting," Standtall added, rather put off.

"D-don't be such a prude, you won't have tah deal with me long--Juss til after we save Staple-Face and bury that warlord and his flunkies..."

"Ur 'til weh die." Interjected the minotaur. For once, I was able to understand him.

"Beh." Bleated the goat.

"Aam tryin' tae spick normal folk gab, Baha--taint mah faut yer lessons ainae th' bess." Well, that moment of clarity was short lived. Back to ignoring him.

Rata-tat-tat!

Keena returned, russet feathers misty with flakes of ice, her gun held firmly in ice-bleached talons. "I could hardly make anything out in this fog." She squawked, landing firmly on the broken asphalt. She popped the slide on her rifle and checked the ammo in her clips. She must have been low, she had a habit of making sure she went into a fight with a full clip. She swapped out for one of her reserve clips and holstered her weapon.

"Raider contact?" Asked Standtall.

"Yes, I think. It was hard to make out, but I definitely shot someone." She spoke hollowly. Well, she did promise to shoot the next raider she saw. This Eternite was supposed to be the moral center of our (temporary)group, but she was merely a sanctimonious trigger-finger, cherry picking the times to be wholesome and good between bouts of sociopathy. I loved her bouts of sociopathy. If only she knew how to keep that switch flipped, then she'd be a threat.

“So you just shot them?” Standtall asked casually. “Were you certain they were a raider?”

With a thoughtful moment of reflection, it dawned on Keena that she may have just shot somepony without knowing for sure. Worse yet, she may have shot the only pony around who might have directions! Chances were, however, if you were in Nommage Valley, you were in league with them or about to become lunch.

“Oh crackers, I never considered--I was just trying to--” She lamented, in genuine talon biting worry. I thought beaks tended to make griffins look severe, yet she managed to pull off malleable expressions. She looked really, really sad right now, much to my glee.

“We ain’t faultin’ you for having an itchy trigger talon,” I snarked. “Better safe than sorry, but if they’re alive, we could use some directions. And if they are a raider...”

“Then finish them off.” Standtall stated.

Did we just agree on something again? The notion made me feel sick enough to reconsider my stance--I might swing my vote if it came down to it. “Yeah, but you’ll have to do it, Keena, my ammo’s too pricey.”

The hippogriff swallowed at the lump in her throat and coughed. “What if it’s not a raider?” Keena asked, her eyes wider than her loud-assed beak. She really should have thought of that before blowing some sorry-assed sap away with her rifle.

“A bullet cures all wounds,” I chimed, delighting in the way her expression paled through her russet plumage. I sighed. Better play nice. “We’ll bandage em’ up and give em’ a lolli and they’ll live happily ever after.” I begrudgingly grumbled.

“I’ll lead the way,” She chirped.

Less than a block away, we found her target, bleeding out near a set of toppled supply crates filled with metal scrap. Nearby, an old oil barrel burned with new fire and what looked to be a meager meal of wormtail(nasty, vicious rodents of unusual size and appetite) sat half-eaten. He was an ugly malnourished

earth pony covered in mange. Green was definitely his color, and to Keena's relief he was adorned in typical Baker Barbarian attire. *Cupcakes: Premade, no baking required! Creamy-Creamy Frosting not included!* That warm-eyed, pink maned pony on the box was hiding something insidious, I knew it! The box art always made me anxious, since I typically associated it with incredibly dangerous, sociopathic cannibals. If you saw that pink pony around South Quadrant, you could be sure the Bakers weren't far behind! Watching you **FOREVER!**

I grinned nonetheless, "Yah done lucked out, Keena. Totes a raider." I slid off of Standtall, leaving a trail of feminine juices. A faint, mischievous snicker left my weary, pink-cloud-tortured lungs.

The raider hadn't managed to crawl very far before passing out, but he'd been wise enough to crawl for the fire barrel to cauterize his wound with a piece of heated rebar. I inspected his still breathing form and came to the conclusion he'd survive, at least long enough for us to pump him for intel. The bullet passed right through, leaving a clean hole through his guts.

I didn't want to waste a healing potion on him, since some "**saint**" gave away a bunch of our supplies, so I utilized his campfire to make healing powder from some Roc Flower and Xander Root I had in my supplies. I traded for these herbs as often as possible, since most of them grew better in regions to the east. Zebra traders were notorious for cutting the shit with bad juju, so it was always a good idea to test out the mixture on somepony you cared little for first.

"You know what you're doing. Where did you receive your training?" Standtall put me on edge with his observations, assuming I couldn't just pick this up on my own.

"I picked it up from some passing Zeebs," I half-lied. My knowledge in alchemical brews was picked up from the passing zebra friendlies, however rare (I once had the pleasure of getting hoofy with Vusi, a friend of my late marefriend), while my medical training was purely a Steel Ranger application. Last thing I ever wanted any Ranger to know was my AWOL status. "Give me some room before I muck up and glue his kidney to his lung."

After applying the powder, his wounds sealed with patches of his mange flaking off to show a healthy, restored pink layer of skin beneath. This stuff was potent as a pony! I tested out a bit more powder, spitting on it to activate it on his mangy fleece. Good stuff, I'd save the rest for Shag-Rag, if I could, maybe it'd detangle his mane. Or make him go bald.

"Why isn't he waking up?" Keena asked with a touch of concern.

“I dunno, do you think it could be becuz yah shot out most his blood?” I sarcastically wagered.

“Beh,” Bleated the insipid Baha, chewing noisily on a can.

“Aye, Baha, Pyregum woods be och quekfex. Warks oan hanno’ers bonnie sweel!” Angus agreed to the baying goat as if something clever was hidden in his dumb mastication. While I tried to process that mush mouthed slang, the minotaur was going through his sizeable waist pouch (which I referred to as a cockpurse) and began tossing things ranging from explosives to unarmed mines and canteens of so-far-unidentified alcohol.

“Checking your purse, fair ‘lass’?” I mocked the skirt (kilt, whatever) wearing bruiser.

“Can oot, fair wench, aam helpin' ye.” He boomed while tossing his belongings out to his companion, who gathered them up into a well organized pile. After the sixth or so bouquet of grenades, my suspension of disbelief had taken a walk around “come the buck on” lane and hit the local bar to pick up mares or stallions. My suspension of disbelief wasn’t picky in that regard.

“How many sex toys do you carry in that purse, mooman?” I berated justifiably.

Angus retorted by hurling the next object at my head, eliciting a squeal. No, not my squeal, somepony elses’. My spinning eyes swirled until they locked onto the dazed, powder blue foal on my chest. I’d be angry if I believed what I was seeing, but Angus must have knocked the sense out of me. My suspension of disbelief was getting lucky, the bar was actually a strip club.

“Ooooh...My head,” Rebel groaned, rubbing his temple.

Next, flying monkeys would fly out of my cooter. “Rebel!” I shouted, causing the foal to flinch. “Angus!” I sputtered, confused at who to be angry at first. I chose to berate them equally at the same time. “How didja get in there?!” I demanded, holding the foal aloft. “And how didja miss this in yo’ bag? You better plead stupidity or I swear, I’m cramming Compensator up your ass and using you assa’ silencer!” My angry, gleaming brown eyes fought to settle on one or the other simultaneously.

Angus offered a shrug, inverting his bag and shaking it out--Producing no more foals, fortunately (for him) and dropping a small mountain of blasting caps, hay, mead bottles, and personal items. "He main hae hitched a ride while Ah was moppin'!"

"Back, we're taking you back right now!" I decided, much to Rebel's protests. "You had an important job to do and you chose to--"

Rebel squirmed out of my grasp and stomped hard onto the ground, "No! You gave me a job tah keep me busy! Record Wrecker knows first aid stuff better!" He shouted over me, which lead to a shouting match and grinding snouts. He learned a ton from me, from mannerisms, to frothing rudeness, thankfully skipping the lewdness. My own personal male mini-me. Most ponies didn't believe me when I said I wasn't his biological mother. (They might have been too stupid to know what biological meant, but I only considered that just now.)

"You listen to me, yah fidget midget!"

"No, you listen to me, yah slutty sow!"

"You're going back, double stamp, you prepubescent plop-pile!"

"Back to what?!" Rebel pushed at me with frail legs, managing only to faceplant himself into the muck covered ground. He coughed, spitting as he glared up at me. I went to help him up out of reflex, but he batted my attempt away, snarling. "Our home is gone! The gang's dead! You're all we have left and you're running off saying you might not come back! That's not fair!"

He caught me by surprise, making me choke on my next words. "The world's not fair, Rebel," I finally managed to say as a faint whisper. "But you have to stay safe, that's what I want for you." I dotingly rubbed the smear of 'please be mud' off his left cheek.

"There's no time," Standtall asserted. "We cannot spare resources to return him. We're in hostile territory--We need to question our prisoner and move on." He nudged the still form of the ugly brown stallion with the dreadlocks. "Get up, you..." He breathed.

The stallion merely groaned.

“Ya do not decide what’s best for MY boy, you got me?!” I bellowed, feeling that hot, acidic bile worm up into my throat. I’d weld his knee joints together and leave him in a bog!

“Yes, you have done so well with your little ones,” Standtall said without an ounce of sympathy.

“How dare you say such things to a grieving mother,” Burst in Keena.

“I don’t need you defending me, you heckling, hybrid hen!” I snapped at Keena.

“Och aye, hae some class, ye cowardly scattershot,” Weighed in Angus.

We were all back at each other’s throats at the drop of a cap. Pre-Dick-Table. Words grew heated, then swelled to threats, and soon, onto the edge of violence. A curdled scream filled the air, one of pure masculine agony, one I knew from experience. Crushed grapes.

Snapped from our bickering, the sweet sound of somepony else in agony diluted the frothing blood rage just enough to seek out the source of the screaming, perhaps to put a bullet in it. That poor, unfortunate raider, his balls were a stage upon which Rebel Riot danced with rude wreckoning, pulping his groin like he wanted lemonade. Biting my lip, I held my breath, backing up to hide my arousal at such a scene. Nothing gets me hotter than going geld-happy on a sleazeball.

Forgotten was our arguing, all eyes watching the foal complete what we all had failed to do with a ruthless set of stomps set to puree.

“I don’t agree with the methods, but I like the results,” Standtall broke over the sound of wailing, a weak tinge of sympathy pain in his voice. I imagined his plump oranges crawling into his guts out of reflexive fear was the cause of his voice jumping an octave.

Angus grabbed his kilt and tugged the plaid fabric down taut, snorting so hard his nose-ring caught him on the bridge of the nose, his voice joining Standtall in reflexive, male empathy. “Where’d he learn tae dae ‘at? that’s jist barbaric!” The Macitaur further complained that his own ‘haggas sack’ ached at the sound, which curled my lips into a dry grin--I’d taught Rebel well, the little sadist. He’d go far.

Only one had the gall to berate the foal, Keena, the churchmouse, of course. “That’s enough, Rebel! You’re hurting him. Quite a bit.”

“Oh, yeah, says the one that shot him? Maybe we should give this one the other half of our supplies?” With a roll of my eyes, I pushed Keena aside to bustle my way in on Rebel’s action. “Good job, sweetie. Very good, butcha don’t know where his balls been at.” I moved the foal aside and let the sad excuse of a raider to fold himself in half. Lofting up a flat, jagged piece of scrap, I held it over the fire to heat it up. “Yah should sterilize it first...” I had no intention of branding or cutting(yet), but the raider did not know that--He didn’t need to know. As the world came back to him, he’d see my ruthless grin and a posse of revenge-lusting widowers.

“W-what are you going to do to him?” Keena asked, her feathers bristling. I knew if I went too far, she’d step in. It was a point of contention in our relationship. She never went far enough to do what needed to be done--Either from irresponsibility or plain thoughtless morality.

“Only enough to make him talk,” I promised. “Rebel, try not to look away. If you’re gonna follow momma around, it’s time for some life lessons.”

“Lesson number one: *Know what you want. Find out how to get it.*” Ponies were weak, pliable, and easy to manipulate. They had needs and desires, many of them crossed over in the Venn diagram of survival. Everypony needs food, comfort, sex, and routine. Well, not just ponies, but every breathing thing. You’d be surprised what you can get from someone if you threaten those things, that’s a cruel lesson I knew first hoof--A lesson I instilled into Rebel Riot and everyone else I dared to call an acquaintance.

A little push and he broke into a sobbing wreck, a little healing powder and he was whimpering gratitude. Everything I wanted to know and many things I never cared to know. His name was Hash Tag, not that I cared, it only made it an inconvenience to tie a name to a pony already dead in my eyes. At any moment, I could plunge that red-hot piece of rebar into his trembling form and end him--right now, I was merely tracing little hearts on his flesh and soothing them with healing powder as long as he kept warbling my favorite song: intel. I didn’t have to up the ante, just the hint of heat against his flesh made him bawl a river of sweet tears.

Their boss was dead, a blatant betrayal by Hades. Why wasn’t I surprised? Why share the market with an army that required sustenance. Liquidated to resources once they fulfilled their purpose, Muffin

Cake and his unmerry band of bakers were rendered undone. Color me pissed off, robbed of a bounty--But you know what I say about gift horses. This raider was merely a low ranking **Left Over**, a conscripted peon, forced to work and adopt their lifestyle. Any sympathy I had died when he mentioned he was a drug dealer, evicted from Greenvale Heights for peddling to foals. Typical piece of shit. He disavowed being a raider any longer, having a spontaneous change of heart in light of recent events, but I didn't buy it, not in the least.

Keena wanted to stop me, but she grew wise when I swung at her with the hot rebar--Do not mess with momma when she's cookin'. A deal--That's what's for dinner. A healthy dose of false promises--A carrot on a stick. If he showed us where the base was, we'd let him keep his plop-smear of a life.

"N-no! Ain't nev-nev goin' back, yo! Tis mads bad! You gots no idea!" He whinnied.

"Yeah, no idea," I purred. "We just came from a hell of a parteh up in Big Top, so you're right. We wouldn't know plop from apples, would we?!" I applied a deep burn, twisting the rebar into his shoulder and refused him any healing powder. "Get the buck up! If you try to run, this lil foal here? He'll shoot you." I pointed at the traumatized Rebel Riot, who up until this point associated me with making boo-boos go away and kissing them better, not making them. "Won't you help mommy out?" I snapped the foal from his stupor, his eyes wide as saucers. The little earth colt had begged to be a part of my work, and now he was my protege.

"I'll keep Hash Tag in check," Keena stepped in, trying to ease the burden on Rebel Riot's sudden step into stallionhood.

The greasy-maned, supposed ex-raider begged for mercy, choking on a mouth full of saliva as snot rolled down his nostrils. "N-no moes! Ah soweh, no moes!" He bumbled in that disgusting, ill educated trash talk that marked him as the raider-raised scum he was.

"Make him get up, Rebel." I ordered, ignoring Keena's protests.

Looking lost, the young pony stepped up, fumbling with his mouth-piece, nudging the stallion with a hoof. It wasn't the same when his target was awake, able to beg, spit, and threaten. The raider swung at Rebel, causing him to drop his revolver. Hash Tag went for it, giving me reason to pin the bastard's foreleg to the ground with the jagged, still-hot piece of rebar. Hash Tag belted out a scream, loud as it was lovely, echoing off the walls of nearby buildings.

“Can’t change, once a raider...” I twisted the blade in the hock of the stupid git, making him groan. “Always a raider.” I clicked my tongue and gave the rebar another half-twist for good measure. “Next one gelds you,” I promised with that punctual twist.

Little did I care how the others thought, but I was relieved the only one trying to get involved was Keena. Standtall merely scrutinized silently while Angus, now finished with gathering his belongings, offered encouragement to Rebel in the form of slurred drivel.

“Gie yer hooves dreich wi' bluid, it gits easier.” Rebel could not appreciate this “wisdom” as he failed to understand a single slurred syllable.

“We’re wasting time,” Standtall finally spoke up, no longer content to stand watching. “Teach the whelping on your own time, **Friend**.”

He just called me a raider?! Where would he get the gall to call me that? I gave the rebar another twist and sneered, taking out my aggression on Hash Tag’s limb before stripping it out, crippling his leg. Letting out a groan, the ugly beast rolled onto his back and clutched his steaming wound, flailing about like a freshly beheaded radroach.

“Rebel, get tha buckin’ gun,” I snarled, giving a very careless application of healing powder to the injured raider, a trite amount, not even enough to close the wound--just enough to keep him able-bodied. “You, up nows er’ you’ll be speakin’ soprano wit’ a lisp!”

Rebel rubbed his bruised cheek. Hash Tag had punched him, and it seems he expected me to make him feel better. I gave a dismissive grunt and pushed him to the task. “Wipe your eyes, you ain’t no foal!” I scolded. It pained me to be so hard, but if he was going to survive tonight, then he needed some spit in the eye and grit in the guts.

We were on the move again, my mood dark, and my dislike for the Steel Ranger in our party growing to obscene rage-spitting levels. I let him know by politely tipping the Compensator’s barrel forward and clunking him on the back of the head with it. This did little other than create an exasperated sigh and mutterings of *‘being too old for foalsitting’* from the aging Crusader.

Clunk!

We were lucky it was so cold, or else the sewage filled potholes, now frozen over, would be another added hazard to avoid thanks to the blanket of white mist. So thick was this fog, that I would doubt even the raider would know the way back, if he wasn't making use of landmarks he knew. At every milestone, the raider would pause to reorient himself and move on, giving each macabre waypoint a second's glance before snorting dismissively and hobbling on, encouraged by a hard push to the flanks by Standtall.

I've seen the horrors of **Friends**, amoral raiders with a penchant for murder; they were polite neighbors compared to the Baker Barbarians. We passed twisted metal power-poles, each truss bowing under the weight of several bodies dangling by their spinal cords; wrecked wagons adorned with wreaths of carcasses, long picked clean, their foreleg, talon, or other extremity pointing out in one cardinal direction unanimously; and one that would stick with me, thankfully mostly obscured by fog, a pit of gravel surrounded by inward pikes. This is where they kept their livestock. I couldn't make out whether or not there was anyone down there.

"Weh tri'tah keep em' cold, but dey spoil quick-quick." Hash Tag spoke, driving that bitter nail of hate deeper into my throat. Only the gates of my teeth kept the foam from spilling out all over Standtall's armor, and only his necessity spared him from an overkill shot with Compensator.

"We didn't ask for a guided tour," I growled at Hash Tag. He offered a soft whimper and hobbled faster, trying to get out of spitting distance.

"I hope we find the choir soon, this worries me greatly." Keena mentioned sadly, her sharp eyes drinking in the details for only a second before she turned away, shaking her head free of mental cobwebs. Many of us were in the same rut, trying not to let our imaginations pen in the suffering those ponies must have gone through--Or worse, yet, what the Eternite Acolytes were possibly subjected to. "This is a tragedy, no doubt, but they will never feel pain again." Keena offered some of her unwarranted anti-pragmatism. The choir was likely already dead, they were dead the moment Keena let them leave the arcade without escort.

Angus and Standtall hadn't been there, but they both offered hope for the best in their own way. Standtall merely 'hmmmed' in either agreement or thoughtfulness while the large, splotched minotaur patted her roughly on the head with his meaty palm.

"They likely already got bumped," Rebel Riot stated honestly.

“Our gods watch over them, they will keep them safe,” Keena chirped solemnly, fluffing her feathers after being handled by the Macitaur.

Some part of me envied her psychosis, that ignorant belief that some creature of great power watched over them, protecting them, making sure they were never alone. It was just a rose colored spy-glass looking into the sun, burning bliss right into her brain.

“Radiation,” Standtall neighed quickly, “This area is saturated.” He moved on, pushing the others to do so. “Somepony was playing with Balefire eggs out here...”

Yeah, I had some idea who, that crazy retard of a stallion, Chunky Salsa; since deceased. I let the barrel drop again out of ire, making me remember how I got into this mess was not appreciated. Stupid bounties, no share for me either; guess I should be happy my treatment was free. Still, it was Steelgraft’s fault I got hurt in the first place, that moron! *“It feels good to do something right for once,”* I recalled saying that. Stupid mare, getting all sappy! My number came, my card punched, then he just...ARGH! After this, this last time, if I survive, that’s it! I don’t owe him anything--I’ll sell him and take my remaining family to New Pegas--

Clunk!

“Stop that,” Standtall barked.

“It’s not so easy to be, well, out here like this,” Keena consoled the young blue foal, who trailed behind her, watching how she ‘encouraged’ the raider who kept a limping pace ahead. “No slacking, please.” She squawked, prodding the ugly stallion in the flank with her assault rifle. He bitterly cursed and mumbled under his breath. “Wait--Repeat that,” Keena asked, a bit more sternly.

Pointless banter, I was sure, so I was going to just tune it out. Keena’s politeness to that waste of life angered me, I saw no point in being pleasant to somepony we had at a disadvantage and was going to be dead soon, anyway. Maybe I could convince Keena to pop him, her bullets were cheaper...

“Sa’ehd dat flooty bot n’ dat stichy-stich stal was nicer n’ yours.” His words made my mind come to a screeching halt. Then everyone else followed suit, nearly bowling each other over, Rebel ran right

into Keena's plot, getting a blush-inducing faceful! (Lucky brat.)

I dropped the stock and perked up, for once delivering an accidental blow to Standtall's headfin. "You saw him?! You saw Steelgraft?! Where? Tell me, now!" My heart pounded in my chest--We might catch him yet, before something terrible happened to him.

Clunk! Standtall grunted, "Definitely too old for foal sitting."

Hash Tag hesitated, weighing his chances, whether action or inaction would retain his life.

"Please," said a voice. Mine. Did I just say please. I covered my muzzle with both hooves as if I'd cursed, that foul word passed my lips genuinely. *"Damnit, ol' girl, don't go showing weakness! Why did you say please?"* I chastised myself mentally, biting my tongue.

"Eit wi' it, mmmooook." Angus rumbled, echoing my own impatience.

Deciding that his life would be in further jeopardy, the raider stopped, leaning into a nearby overturned hauler-wagon. Sputtering over his own flabby, slit lips he offered up a meager tale of rescue and redemption (Pshaw!) where he played the damsel in distress and Steelgraft played his knight in shining armor (GAY). I was half-glazed by the story, quite familiar with the reckless yet revolutionary antics of the undead pre-war delivery colt. He was half-decent at delivering packages of pain and carnage. *"He gut blat tah fsssh--but kay-yay."* Yeah, taking a beating, kinda his super power--Rebel Riot said as much, somehow enamored by the raider's grisly tale of comic-esque bravado.

A single lower lid seized, refusing to open as it cut into the white of my eye, leading to a spontaneous development of a twitching tic. "Cut to thah CHEESE, skunkmeister!"

"Slo-mo think-meats, mote short a' full huff, tangoed the poprock, spaghetti..." Hash Tag sputtered incoherently, so deep was his fear that he devolved into rattling off in the universal tongue of junk humpers and fizz suckers. To those that didn't understand 'Junker Jive', he just rattled off like a crazy drugged up Friend-Zoned, tweak-freak not unlike those half-mad, Fallen Freakers that roamed tipping back Discord's cursed soda. In short, to understand crazy, you had to be cray-cray-to-dah-Z.

I understood him perfectly.

“Lipflap casual, frag-fag.” I replied swiftly, narrowing my eyes, hating him and the cunt flower he spawned from.

Ruffling her feathers for warmth, the hippogriff flitted her headcrest forward, like an antennae feeling around the air. “Isn’t that the language the Falle--” Her surmise was halted as my magic zipped her beak shut. She clasped her talons to her squawk hole and worked her claws into her split, trying to pry her jaws open. With my stamina drained, it only took seconds for my focus to wane, and soon she was free to move her sore jaw, glowering at me the whole time. Wisely, for a change, she did not speak. (So she can learn!)

“...Tey’s kill me--Tey’s fin’ ou!” He sputtered. “Find out I helped!” If his entire gang was dead, I highly doubted they’d come back from the dead an---wait, they could come back. Like Curbstomp. That was a terrifying idea, what would become of insane cannibal bakers after Deadmare conversion? Well, if he was going to be put into such a bind, understandably so, then up the ante--Sweeten the deal!

“Tell me where to find Stitchface and the pain stops,” I offered.

Such a deal was too good to pass up, he knew it, I knew it, and the shallow grave with his name on it knew it too. Never is Gangrene kind when her generosity is snubbed. Unsurprisingly, he took my offer in trade--His worthless life for the valuable information.

“North!” He blurted, pointing in the cardinal direction.

Everyone jumped back at the sound of his foreleg splintering as I ruthlessly brought the heavy piece of jagged rebar down. Hash Tag squealed, his foreleg dropping to the side, crumpled and useless. Cannon bone to Pastern, multiple breaks with significant displacement. Yeah, no walking for him, not without a healing potion or a splint.

“Don’t lie to us!” I snarled, visibly seething.

Keena became an obstacle, and rounded swiftly to ‘target’ as she stared me down. “That’s more than enough, Gangrene! You’re scaring Rebel!”

“Momma, stop!” Rebel Riot begged. He tried to tug at me, nuzzling against me. His tears wet my pelt, tugging at my heart strings. Keena’s position wasn’t helped, even with Rebel on her side. No pony else cared hide nor hair for the raider’s well being.

“Get out the way, Keena,” I warned, raising the rebar. I caught a face-full of her rifle’s cock and backed off, not wanting to get a load to the face. “Whose yard you roostin’ in, churchmouse?” I mocked angrily. “Does your stupid Goddess say something about sparing raiders?”

“This is torture!” She squawked! “And you still plan on killing him!”

On any other day, yes, I’d kill him. Remorselessly. Today was special, you see after getting drenched in more blood than a lesbian midwife in a communal hospital, I’d lost a bit of bloodlust. Extracting information was now a new tier of asspain now that the raider believed he would die.

“No, Keena, this ain’t torture; this is me negotiatin’.” I licked my lips, glowering. “Do you even care what this prick would do to your own? He’s one of em, the rat bastards that took your charges and madja look stupid!” No conviction, not for this, to do what needed to be done, she didn’t have that gumption. She could be cold, I knew that, when pushed, but there was never true spiteful malice, just loss of composure. I’d prefer that to this.

“Do you want to do this in front of Rebel?” Keena asked pointedly, talon on the trigger.

“Maybe yah should ask him,” I smartly replied, nodding over to my left. Rebel Riot had skittered back, far behind me as he clutched to my rear legs, eyes shut tightly to the world, the poor lil greenhorn!

“Enough,” breathed Standtall, his voice taking a surprisingly sharp edge. “You’re not getting results. We have constraints.” The large, barrel chested stallion set one single foreleg between us and broke us apart, his armored underbelly brushing the very tips of my ears. Suddenly, I felt so very small, like a child being chastised by an overbearing parent. I hated that.

The domineering ranger offered no words or requests, only actions. He scooted Keena aside with a sweep of that same leg, causing her to squawk in protest, and towered over the crippled stallion nursing his injuries. “Point.” Was the only thing he said to the crippled raider.

Content to let somepony else do the work, and even less interested in getting on the bad side of a one-ton horse, I stepped aside to rummage through my supplies for a watered down healing potion. No bone mend, that stuff was rare to come by and nearly impossible to make without a zebra alchemist's expertise. Those crafty stripes had a way of finagling common, mutated flora into doing the jobs of their rarer, warmer-climate cousins.

Once Standtall had gotten the ugly buck's attention, enough for him to point in a direction, I proceeded to hide the potion in one of the many junk-filled boxes dumped by the rickety old trawler. Why waste a weak potion, hiding it for Hash Tag to find and use?

Simple, I had two reasons. It'd keep him busy so he couldn't follow us or warn any of his friends that might still be around, but most importantly, I didn't want him to die too quickly. If he died, his suffering would be over, and I couldn't let him off easy. He may have never harmed a soul, not directly, but he'd enabled many to do their sick work. That bottle was more spit n' water than potion anyway, not nearly enough to save his life. He'd suffer for a few more hours before succumbing to his injuries and exposure. Keena would be none the wiser, had she not given away half our supplies earlier, I might have bothered saving him, so it's really her fault.

"Was that so hard?" Standtall breathed out heavily, directing his discontent to both Keena and I respectively as he trudged off in the direction that Hash Tag pointed.

"Yeh sure he ainneh lyern'?" Angus called after Standtall, a bit skeptical.

"I'm sure," said Standtall, "He's pointing in the same direction."

"So he was telling the truth the first time?" I smiled viciously.

Keena shot me a dirty look, turning away with a flutter of feathers. Angus gave a sigh, offering the raider a canteen of alcohol "To keep him warm" and "Kill the pain." I guess that was okay, I had no claim over any of his supplies, and if it squeezed another hour of suffering out of Hashtag, I was all for it.

Sniveling, Hash Tag went limp, his teeth gritting hard together. He shrunk away from me, eyes clenched shut as I whispered into his ear, "Pot's in dah wood cube. Fast-find." I spoke to him in his disgusting gutter language, telling him he could find a potion in one of the crates.

Cast off, like a used rag on the floor, the raider would spend the rest of his short life reflecting on his stains and how he would die like all did, wasted and unfulfilled. Every step I put between that sad excuse of a stallion made Rebel's burdensome weight lighter on my shoulders, which I chalked up to elation at being rid of excess baggage.

Rebel, who was shivering so violently he could barely walk a straight line sober, was the only weight I gladly carried. Standtall was not a bicycle built for two and I wasn't about to trust Keena to carry my kid. With no alternatives, I had snatched up the disgruntled, traumatized runt by the back of the neck like a disobedient puppy and tossed him on. His complaints were brief, but the chatter of his teeth was constant.

Walking in the biting cold was a chore, and with a crippled leg, I could forget about running. The best I could do was a labored, weak trot. At some point, my bandage had frosted over, clinging to my skin where I stripped a good, rotten chunk free after exposure to Pink Cloud. Rebel's exposure had burned his lungs, evident by the raspiness of his voice and shallow breathing. A life of chronic respiratory ailments lay ahead for him and a leg brace for me. I wanted to kick myself for not grabbing any medical braces while I was at the Stable Heart Hospital, but how could I have known it'd come in handy now?

One good thing about it being so cold out, there wasn't a single creature stupid enough to be out on nights like these, they would be in shelter, probably in one of the nearby buildings or wrecked convoys. That only became a problem when you tried to find shelter for yourself, competition was nature's way of reminding you that you were made of edible meat-stuff. Last I checked, most everything had added meat to their diet--Or reproductive cycles--Like Paradores. Good thing Paradores hated cold! Freaky, little, egg-laying, body-snatching, neurotoxin creating, googly-eyed hate beasts! Still, we could chance upon a nest or disturb a shelter, which is why I was glad Standtall took the lead; anything he disturbed would end up flattened.

Standtall's massive form cleaved through the thick mist, the bright light from his headlamp doing little to scatter the ground-bound clouds. This is what it must feel like to be a pegasus, to be inside a cloud. From the reflected light of the headlamp, Standtall made out the shape of obstacles like overturned cargo wagons and mountains of discarded office furniture, weathered from exposure, and turned us to avoid them.

For several minutes, the only sound was the beat of hooves on hard, broken concrete, the chattering of teeth, and eclipsing the rest, the mighty din of Standtall's metal hooves. If we were trying to be quiet, then we were failing. A mile out, maybe more, those metal thuds echoed, giving any enterprising

raiders or Deadmare plenty of notice to expect us. Soon, all sounds quieted, Standtall stopping abruptly, causing a short scuffle on bodily collision between him and the Minotaur just behind him. Angus gave a displeased grunt and knudged the massive Stallion in the hind end with his hammer's haft, saying what we were all wondering, "What's th' hauld up?" Well, I think that's somewhat close to what we were thinking, if a bit hard to understand.

Our favorite resident bootlicker took time to respond, tapping his large hoof to the side of his helmet in valiant effort an ex-Ranger like me recognized. It was the "work, you stupid piece of crap" strike, a common trouble shooting technique urging compliance with a shoddy or malfunctioning module. "Something is scrambling Navigations, EFS just went offline. I got a bead on several unknown contacts before everything went dark."

It was then, that faint singing could be heard, and on its coattails rode faint laughter.

Keena was the first to come to a conclusion, one that was likely to be wrong. "Friendlies? That could be the choir," Keena chirped, touching down next to me, her tone hopeful and relieved, "Oh they're alright! I'm so glad!" I wasn't at all convinced, it wasn't like the Bakers would let a hard-won meal stand out in the middle of dense fog to hold a candlelight vigil.

I grit my teeth, glaring daggers in the rough direction of where Keena stood. "Good, we find em' n' beat em' til they stop singin'." My teeth chattered loudly, my nose drippings were nearly frozen.

"We will do no such thing!" Keena squawked.

"Fine, whatever," I grumbled, "Can we get movin'? I'm freezin' to death here!"

My tail began to twitch, a dancing irritation on the end of my spine. It finally stilled when I gave it a flick, giving my hind end a curious glance over Rebel. What was that all about?

PLAP! A sweaty stink filled my nostrils as something heavy, wet, and warm hung over my face like the world's most unpleasant blanket. The musky smell of body odor and the feeling of damp fur against my cheeks made me gag. Angus had heard my complaints and removed the Timberwolf skull pinning his cowl together before depositing it upon us. The gross thing stuck to my horn and unraveled, slapping between my forelegs. I didn't understand a thing he said after that hot, sticky hide met my numb face, but I wouldn't slight him for being *'helpful'*. Rebel offered up a soft 'ugh' of disgust as I wound the

pelt around my neck and over his shoulder, embracing the musky, sweaty warmth that still radiated with the minotaur's body heat.

Keena stifled a giggle, which I killed completely by mentioning I could use a few feathers to complete my new look. She was rather attached to her plumage, in every sense of the word, and it did wonders to keep her warm in even the coldest of climate.

Not one to show gratitude openly, I warned the minotaur, "I better not get fleas..."

"Ah eent gut fleese." Angus sniffed, "Ah mite bi' smelleh tho'." Understatement of the day! It was a far cry from Curbstomp stink, but it wasn't roses either. Of all our party members, I think Angus was the one I disliked the least. I was considering keeping him around after this, he may be hard to understand, but he never took offense when I chose to ignore him. Being new to the city, he'd need somepony with experience to show him around, and being a gang leader, I could always use more willing muscle. My mind churned with ideas on how to best use the minotaur, I had yet to properly gauge his moral compass, to see if he was Viper material.

"Let's get a gander on this noise complaint," I said.

"He's way aheid oan 'at," Angus snorted as he trundled past, after the vanishing shadow of the giant Steel Ranger. They both ignored the call to slow down, and Keena was much faster than me, giving a quick flap of her wings to shoot off after the two. Standtall was much too far ahead now, and he wasn't slowing down. His enormous shadow vanished into the fog, taking the other shapeless shadows of our group with him. Limping along, I struggled to catch up, hoping to see their silhouettes in the fog. The light I summoned from my horn was faint, but the fog was dispersed, if ever slightly, by the presence of my weak magical light. I thought I saw brief movement, here and there, in the fog, but the shadows vanished behind thick blankets of fog as soon as I looked in their direction.

I wanted to holler for them to stop but the cold mist chilled my breath into a violent, full body tremor. "Ey! Ey! Slow tha'fricklefree down!"

"F-fudgesicles." Shivered Rebel, his hot breath tickling the fur of my cheek.

I pushed ahead, nearly slipping on the occasional patch of iced overflow. All I could do was follow the direction we were headed and hope I didn't run into anything. I couldn't see any tracks, making

me worry I'd taken a wrong turn, which wasn't possible because I was walking in a straight line! How the buck does a one-ton horse not leave discernable tracks? Even worse, what kind of blind idiot loses a one ton horse? The only things that grew louder was my tired panting and the growing sound of music.

Lucky for us, we didn't have to go much further, I could hear the music just up ahead, as well as the laughter. I saw movement overhead, a shadow dipping low and touching down. Was that Keena? I got my answer soon enough when I emerged from a blanket of pea-soup fog into a clearing where the fog had thinned. The shadow from earlier was roughly equine in shape, facing away. There was a mass on their back, which looked like a folded pair of wings. The origin of the eery laughter and music remained a mystery, but now I could scarcely make out the tune of "Hush now Quiet now."

"Keena! Wh-why'd yah leave me t-tah trot? Where are the others?" I wanted to sound angry, but I was much too cold to do so, instead I chattered away with my teeth, eyeing the vaguely pony shaped form with contempt. The music only grew louder, in pace with my struggles to scream, as if trying to drown out the sound of my heart beating in my ear drums. It only pissed me off. "Where the buck's th-that racket c-comin' from?!"

Rebel yawned, his head falling heavily onto my shoulder as he drifted off to an unnatural sleep. My horn began to itch, the air became thick with magical power. The fog grew denser. The form slowly turned to face me. I shone the light in their face, my eyes widening with absolute terror as I looked myself in the eyes. It was me! A gaunt, decaying version of me, with sunken, soulless eyes. Under its gaze, I froze, unable to act as my tortured mind tried to make sense of the horror show. The corpse smiled, her horn flickering as she pulled an identical foal from her back and set them on the ground.

I shot my gaze over my shoulder to see Rebel still sound asleep. I blinked a few times and shook my head, looking back to see the apparition still standing there, now over the sleeping form of her own duplicate Rebel Riot. She began singing the most haunting version of "Hush now" I had ever heard, consolingly stroking the foals mane. Then, she put a gun to the sleeping child's brow.

"Stop!" I shouted, terror gripping at my heart. Trembling, I held the Cornhusker Revolver to Rebel's temple. Invisible little strings tethered to my limbs, pulling me to act out a homicidal dance. Tears roll down my cheeks, bitter and cold. My confused mind betrayed me with a sense of calm relief, that I was merely laying my child to rest for a final time. He would see his brothers and sisters soon, Taffy and Shag-Rag would follow.

"Rebel, wake up!" My fitful cries, at odds with my body, failed to wake the foal up. Through gritted teeth, I forced my neck to stiffen and raise, locking the other mother in my sights. There was a

thick, swirling fog filling my mind, my pulse sounding a drum in my temple. I couldn't escape the sound of music accompanied by laughter. Mirrored movements, right down to the breathing. At no less than my greatest effort, my horn blazing with magic so hot it scorched my skin, did I manage to tip the barrel upward until I felt its cold kiss under my chin. My twin, in kind, held the barrel just as I did. With a saucy grin, I locked gazes with her, seeing a hint of surprise in her soulless eyes.

"Hush now, Quiet now, we're already dead..."

The gun went off, lodging the last sliver of sanity into our skulls. I could taste the smoke in my mouth and the rising steam burn my tongue. Blood streamed from every hole on my face, same as the spectre's, but only one of us stood. She fell to the ground with a sick thud and vanished. My choked grunt was akin to a sigh of relief, tasting of heat and copper. I seriously just shot myself in the head, I must have missed my brain, because I had the wherewithal to consider how batshit crazy I was to do such a thing. The constant spew from my snout steamed on the ground. Cold asphalt never felt so soft, even with my skull bouncing off of it. Sunlight's warmth kissed every limb. I'd never seen the sun, or felt its warmth directly on my skin before, but I imagine it must have felt something like this. I would die soon.

The nature of the beast and my own will did battle; natural chemical cocktails eased my pain and put me into a complacent state of mind, preparing me to die, but I was not ready to die. Pushing my mental fortitude to the brink, I focused to cast a spell. **Stablize** was a bread and butter spell among medics, and incredibly useful to stop bleeding. In trade, I kept my life and got a migraine that put the pain of a gunshot to shame. Barely conscious, I stood, teetering on the fence between life and death.

After quaffing several potions from my barding, my wound knit itself together, clotting uncomfortably. I still had a hole in my palate, and I could feel the tell-tale rattle of a metal slug somewhere in my sinus cavity. I shook the final dregs of my last potion bottle into my mouth, choking it down. The taste of smoke and burnt flesh mixed with the bland flavor of Dr. Helping Hoof's Foal Fixer--a child's healing potion, topping off my health.

"Well, that was close," I said to myself with a genuine sigh of relief. "I wonder how the others are doing." The song persisted, but it was easier to ignore now. My horn continued to itch and my ears wouldn't stop twitching. My horn never itched like this before, it was a new phenomenon. It had something to do with the song, a magical area of effect that caused whatever horror show that was. It was a wonder how I could sense magic, and while searching for smelling salts in my satchel, my hoof bumped the curious pink miniature. I almost regretted pilfering the queer little thing. Her smile hid something sinister, as if to say; "I am **FOREVER**".

I pulled out the smelling salts, wrapped deceptively like candy. Candy with warning labels. I cracked the capsule and went to wake Rebel, but a sudden muscle spasm caused me to fumble. My tail was twitching again, much more fiercely, trying to jump off my ass. I steadied it with a hoof and grumbled, bending down to pick up the capsule between my teeth. Air rushed over my mohawk and something came down hard nearby. It was Keena! She nearly took my head off with that dive-bomb!

“Watch it!” I snapped, “You almost hit me!”

“Thought you’d get away with it, didn’t you?!” Keena accused madly, spinning to lock me in her sights. She shouldered her rifle and danced her sights up my center.

I lit up my horn and snatched the discarded revolver up as I dove sideways, a three-round burst tearing into the earth where I had just been. I popped off a round at her, aiming for anything vital, but she was much too quick, taking to the air.

“Keena,” I had to try reasoning with her, if it meant she stopped just long enough for me to pin her down. “It’s me, Gangrene!”

“You can’t lie to me, Meat Pie! I saw you try to poison that child!” Keena shrieked madly. Another trio of bullets sang out in my direction, one sinking into my shoulder. Damn, she was a good shot--I couldn’t juke the airborne hippogriff’s arbitrary aim. Warm blood seeped from the wound as I toppled forward, biting my tongue on the way down. My tongue piercing got caught in between my front teeth. My revolver spoke for me, a loud, resounding “Screw you” in metal form. I clipped one of her wings, taking out one of her primary flight feathers. As much as I hated her, I cringed in sympathy when I heard her bounce off the asphalt.

I had to make it quick and put her down now as painlessly as possible. I tackled the prone hybrid and wrestled her into submission, slamming her head into the ground twice. I’d stunned her well enough and set the the revolver’s barrel at the base of her skull. I went to pull the trigger and--

I. Could. Not. Do. It.

I’ve killed acquaintances before, when their usefulness ends or when, inevitably, they would turn at the fork in the road. Alliances rarely ended on notable terms, but with Keena, she always said that she enjoyed the time we spent, as if it wasn’t just a job I’d been freelanced to do. For all our differences, we

had one thing in common, a motherly drive to protect those who could not protect themselves. She was a lousy babysitter and I was a horrible mother.

In our failings, we were undeniably equal. In our love, we were the same.

“Keena, snap out of it!” I begged, the revolver rattling in my grasp. “You ain’t yourself! The fog, it’s doing this!”

In my moment of weakness, the tide turned. As soon as she was able, Keena fought tooth and claw to take my place. My revolver clattered to the ground. I felt the cold barrel of her rifle poke between my ribs. She had me dead to rights, and I’d used all my tricks to cheat death once. Cheating death was something you did once in a lifetime, not something you made habit.

“Where are the other children?” Keena demanded, her itchy talon on the trigger. Some small talk to hasten the end? I wasn’t going to buy the farm, all I needed was some time to refocus my mind, maybe I could dispel the effects of the fog with a **Cure Condition** spell? There were hundreds of those spells in the medical field, but magical mind altering spells and their cures fell more into the psychological schools of magic, rather than the medical field.

“They’re already dead, Bird-brain!” I spat at her, sorrow creeping into my tone. “The Bakers caught the choir near a week ago, foals don’t last under their care, you know that! Lyin’ to yourself the whole time! Playing arcade games to earn a new shooter? How stupid do you think I am?” She could have ended my tirade at any moment with a single pull of that trigger, but if I was going to die, then she had to know exactly why she pissed me off so much.

“They’re alive!” Keena insisted, driving her point home by flipping to semi-auto and putting a round in one of my legs. I groaned and squirmed, letting out a brief cry of pain. She pressed the hot tip of her rifle against my fur, causing a painful burn. “Now tell me where you took them, you sick cannibal!”

“You friggin’ insuffera--” Keena cut me off with a firm riflebutt to the snout. She should have just killed me, ended it there. I wish she would have, the pain I was in was excruciating. I gave her another dose of reality, choking out my words in a nasally, broken voice. “The deal they had with that Gravelord went upside! Even if the choir was alive then, the Deadmare would have liquidated all resources! That means them kids! They’re dead, dead, dead, dead!”

Bang! The bullet clipped my ear and the blazing barrel was pressed right under my horn. I grit my teeth against the pain. Keena's demeanor grew sinister, and she spoke no words of her own, buying into the illusion created by whatever foul magic was carried by the mist's call. I wondered how this music was affecting the others, they were likely in a similar predicament, fighting one another just like Keena and I. My thoughts couldn't be with them, they had to be here, focused on getting out of this alive.

"Pray now, beg now--Lay your sins to rest..." The lyrics were haunting, accompanied by the strings and winds of otherworldly instruments. The music didn't sound natural. A dark whisper permeated my mind with the desire for death's sweet embrace. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, maybe this is how it was supposed to end? I could see her again. I could see my *Star Racer*...Buck that noise! There would be no rest for me, not yet! My chores weren't done, I still had kids to raise and fortunes to make!

"The moment my eyes close, the kids become somepony else's problem," I thought bitterly. I'd fight a little while longer, then make the bed I slept in.

Keena began regurgitating the lines to the wretched hymn, her voice harsh and unkind. The barrel under my temple, now cooled, ground my head into the pavement. I closed my eyes and strained, reaching out with every fiber of my mental acuity to grasp for the rifle's safety.

Click!

Lucky dice, the magazine had gone dry! Who knew Keena habitually swapping out magazines would save my life! She must have grabbed a short one while under control of the spell, and the orchestrator didn't know her habits! Keena kept her full mags on her bandolier, low ones on the hip-strap. Sure, I was still bleeding pretty badly, but the lull in assault let me focus on my spell. The ethereal green channel of my spell struck Keena between the eyes just as she brought her rifle's butt down at the base of my horn. My vision blurred with tears as the song of my pounding heart thundered in my ears, drowning out everything. I couldn't think, everything grew foggy as my limbs numbed. I could hear her, the warm laugh of the pegasus that flew away with my heart, I could feel her breath on my cheek. Please, not now, don't tease me!

"I'll always protect you," Star Racer whispered. You liar! You liar! You left me, you died! All that's left, your only mark on the Wasteland, is that stupid, broken down warbeast! Why do I have to finish what you helped start? What good was fighting **Hades** when we could have just ran away together? You would still be here, the kids would still be here! I hate him! I hate you! I hate everything!

The pain in my head thundered, throbbing heavily, making images swim in the corners of my vision. Keena's presence vanished, replaced by another foreboding shadow in the mist. Standtall? The massive Ranger secured Keena under hoof; maybe he was crushing her? I wondered what he had planned for me.

Standtall grunted, "I should have known--The Suicide Symphony." The high beam of his headlamp cut through the fog, causing it to scatter and fall in unnatural ways. It was almost like butter, churning, swirling, and building up walls. That's how we had been separated. "Angus! I found them!"

A haggard, winded Minotaur bumped into the scene, bending himself in half as he wheezed, "Swair they waur reit behin' us."

"It's a good thing we ran into a friend," Standtall grumbled, struggling to keep Keena under control. I could not make sense of Standtall's words, I did not know what "friend" he meant. I held out hope that it would be Steelgraft, that somewhere in the fog, they ran into him and he knew what had created the song and how to counter it.

The song receded, leaving only the cacophony of laughter--The origin of which materialized from the mists, a collection of nightmarishly reassembled Robronco-model robots led by a garish, pink spritebot. That same, irritating enigmatic robot from Greenvale Heights. I had the misfortune of seeing it twice in one horrible night.

PNK-3 beamed down at our tired, battered little party. "Boy, it's sure a good thing you guys ran into me in the fog, and I knew about that song, and I knew how to counter it! ...I'm not sure why giggling really works, but gee-whillikers, does it ever!"

This was the friend Standtall mentioned? My unfocused eyes struggled to follow even the hint of movement, and feeling disoriented, my head fell back onto the ground.

"You guys are late!" PNK-3 chided. "And wow, you look awful!" She added, her voice very close to me. "Hey! You can't sleep yet, the party hasn't even started!"

I wanted to curse, but the world fell from under my hooves as I lost consciousness.

It is said, that on this day, Gangrene's heart grew three sizes, for she could not kill her friend. Let me

check the challenge rating of a Hippogriff so I can tease you about how much EXP you would have gotten.

...

You passed up on about 65 experience and a chance at a rare drop griffin hat. How do you live with yourself, you filthy casual.