

Chekhov Stole My Gun

"If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there."

"Hey again Dise, it's me, Mr New Haygas, which means it's time for the news: it seems the Steel Rangers patrolling around the Snake and Old Rush rivers have accused me, Mr New Haygas, of being a shill for NCA bits, an accusation as foolish as it is incorrect. Dise only accepts caps, and there's no place I'd rather be than here." He chuckled into the microphone, "When the NCA comes up, I report it as I would anypony, and Celestia knows they have enough to report about. Well, that's how it goes in the wasteland. Here's a new song from a local entertainer known as 'The Traveller'; don't ask about the name, I couldn't tell you. ."

*"Oh, give me a home where the Minotaur roam.
Where the mole rat and the bloat sprite play.
Where seldom is heard an encouraging word,
And my coat is not glowing all day."*

"Home, home on the wastes," Well this song got repetitive. I lowered my head let out a sigh and kept walking. It had been a long trip since Stable 123; we lucked upon a small trading group called 'The Gun Farmers' who, uh, traded guns. Go figure. They were a bit suspicious of us, and I of them, but Serenity knew the land little, and I not at all so we needed a guide. Luckily enough, they lost a few bucks on their trip and needed another gun in case of raiders. Unfortunately, I still had to pay way for Serenity and even then they did not like the idea of dragging a filly around. Not that they spoke much to me about it. Apparently, I was scary.

*"Where the rads ain't too high, and The Watcher's aren't bad
The Hydras are playful and mild
Oh, I would not exchange this home on the wastes
for the only big city so wild"*

Something told me the song was being just a bit sarcastic in its assessment. For the most part, the travel had been slow going, moving at a ludicrously slow brahmin speed around a huge jut of a mountain that rose like a pimple on the face of the wasteland. Hills the wasteland had in spades, but this was the only mountain in miles. It also took a bloody long time to get around.

*"Home, home on the wastes.
Where the Goddess' great armies still play
Where seldom is heard an encouraging word,
And my rads just keep rising all day."*

"You mind turning that off?" The buck in front of me asked. He was a pale purple stallion with a green and blue mane, hiding under a rather fancy looking hat, and a stub of a tail that did little but accentuate his rather fine looking flank. What? Don't judge me. There's nothing wrong with sampling the merchandise.

"No."

"Please..." Fine ass, but no backbone. A poor combination. Also prone to headaches and whining from what I've seen. He was apparently a pro at fixing things, so at least he had that going for him. Still annoying as hell to walk guard duty with.

I cleared my throat.

"No."

*"Home, Home on the wastes.
Where the mole rat and the bloat sprite play.
Where seldom is heard an encouraging word,*

And my coat just keeps glowing all day."

"See it's over. Was that so bad?" He grumbled and nodded as my radio continued to blare. As we walked my leg began to sting but a little. It had healed well after the incident at Stable 123. Serenity had been doing better as well; the murky water and whole almost dying thing left her with a bad fever. The first few days she was barely conscious, but it had broken the night before: she was still ill, but at least she was awake.

"You shouldn't tease, Grimy," She mumbled on my back, using her pet name for Grimer (if you haven't figured it out, that would be the whiny unicorn I was bothering with music). Shrugging my shoulders, I shook her just enough to make her think she was falling and sending her into a giggling fit. "S-stoooooop. I'm bein' serious." I stopped in my tracks just long enough to turn off my radio. The songs were getting repetitive anyway.

"Thanks." Grimer turned his head offering me a dull smile, before trotting back along his head low.

If I told you this shell of a pony was the 'leader' of these 'Gun Farmers', please don't laugh too hard. To hear his trading partners talk, he looked weak but knew guns better than anypony else alive; after he managed to fix up my .308 calibre sniper with parts from my old .357 repeater I simply had to agree. Even still, of the ponies I'd met so far in the wasteland Nanny Jane would have sold him manure for a love potion, Pearly would have kicked his head the other way around, and Silver Bullet wouldn't have wasted the bullets killing him. That being said, he was alive and that was more than two of my examples could say: so, he must have been doing something right.

As we corned the last part of the rocky mountain base, I looked upwards. The very tip of the mountain struck through the cloud layer leaving a small patch of clear blue sky encircling the mountains tip. Luna Hornfuck me, I don't think I've ever seen the sky before. Just looking up with the the huge mountain framing the endless void... woah. Yeah, that's one way to make yourself dizzy. Shaking my head I tore my sight away from the abyss.

"Yeah." Grimer smacked his lips, "Threw up the first time I saw it." I'm sure he did. "Over there, called Timber." He pointed with his head. Following his movements, I saw a small village on the south side of the mountain that looked, and I could have been wrong, recently built.

"Impressi-"

A gravely voiced roared, "Stop Where You Are!" That's okay, I really had nothing to say anyway. I backed up quickly, and bent down on my haunches to let Serenity off, before turning my battle saddle at the voice. Scratch that. Voices. The horn fucking thing was really just an expression, it wasn't meant to be taken literally. Metaphor appeared not to be the wasteland's strong point.

Adrenaline pumped through me as a squad of NCA ponies marched up to our little group. Only five though, and they didn't even attempt stealth, walking straight down the road at us. The safety of my rifle clicked off, and the scope snapped up over my eye. I hunched down as the rest of our gang scrambled for guns and ammo. They stopped just meters in front of us, the only sound the cocking of the guns on all sides. Serenity whimpered and hid behind the only cart. The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

"We surrender."

What!? My head wrenched away from my battle-saddle towards Grimer. He was cowering and bowing, that coward. I gritted my teeth and turned back to the NCA.

"Take their weapons, and confiscate their goods until we can verify they aren't selling to raiders." I glowered at the Stallion with the star shaped badges. Until he took off his helmet magically. His skin... was not. It looked almost as if he had been flayed and only grew it back half-way leaving it patched grey and red, with wisps of mane sticking ostensibly to his head around his rough horn. When he cracked his neck his molted skins broke and opened, but didn't bleed.

The rage subsided into shock. I'd never seen a ghoul before.

The NCA troopers relived us of our weapons and supplies before marching us down through the one pony town. To my surprise, the town was completely new, or at least not two hundred years old like everything else. Houses and buildings lined the streets made of wood, not reconfigured trains carts or the like. None were painted, but just looking at them was impressive. A full town made in the wasteland from material that wasn't scavenged. Compared to Bridle Hope or Marefort, the place was a pristine centre of wastelander ingenuity. Well, except for the ramshackle tents on the far end of town. Outside the tents, they had planted a flag showing a red phoenix rising in front of a green five pointed star on a white background.

We stopped at a large three-story building and were pushed through under strict orders not to leave town and not to cause any trouble. The bar we were pushed into was large, but the way the walls seemed to slope inward made it feel cramped. It still was cleaner than Marefort. Smelled better too; like sweat and fire instead of shit and oil.

The sweet (and talkative) bartender took pity on our plight and gave us a room for free until a paying customer needed it. The 'room' consisted of a single bed on the ground, and a small dresser.

Shaking Serenity on my back she didn't respond. I bent my neck around and couldn't help but smile at the small pink pony sleeping in a ball on my back. Lifting her up as gentle as I could by the scruff of her neck, I laid her gently on the small bed. For a second, from the way her leg twitched as I set her down, I thought I'd woken her up. But she just curled back into a ball, snoring softly.

Don't get any ideas, I didn't care for fillies and planned on getting rid of her as soon as possible. Seriously. Turning from the room, I quickly trotted downstairs. I needed a drink.

"Rather die than live like that." I growled as I finally sat down at the bar beside Grimer. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the image of that corpse-pony out of my head. Even when they took my rifle away, I didn't protest, my mind too fixated by the ghoul. I'd heard of them sure enough, but to see one up close was a completely different thing. Sometimes things are so disgusting you just can't look away.

"Ain't so bad," Grimer said, letting an empty shot glass drop from his mouth onto the bar. "Hear tell they live forever."

Forever as a corpse. Was that cosmic irony? I sighed, motioning for the bar tender to pour me a glass. I could really go for some whiskey... and from the looks of it I wasn't the only one. The large ground floor was filled with down-on-their-luck ponies. They were drinking in silence, with the wooden walls of the bar leaning in on them as if they held the weight of the world.

"It'd be bad," I insisted, as my drink finally slid down the bar towards me.

"The NCA has more Ghouls than you can spit at." I imagined ghouls got spit on a lot. "Eye Glow, the largest of the City-States that makes up the NCA is made almost entirely of ghouls. Come from Stable 102." I raised my eyebrow as the whiskey snaked down my throat and burned into my chest. "Heard the recordings myself. Stable-Tec made the vault wrong on purpose to test the effects of extended magical radiation." He grinned with his rotten teeth, "Guess they found out."

"You know this how?"

"Been there once," He scratched at the hard bar with his hoof, "More than once. Fought in the Red War too." Never heard of anything like that. Though I couldn't say I was surprised. War never changes. "It's a nice place, not so nice as Dise, but what is?"

"You've been around."

"Here and there." He admitted, dropping off his stool onto all fours stomping the dirt floor to stretch his legs.

"Travelled from Manehattan to Flankyard, Roam to Dise." I was... surprised. He didn't seem the adventurous type, or the type to be able to survive. If he went to Manehattan, that meant he must have travelled through the northern passes, and the Crimson Hoof by all rights should have torn him apart. And yet there he was, standing with his beautiful ass to me.

"Anywhere you haven't been?" I smirked, gulping down another drink courtesy the doughy unicorn mare who worked both the bar and inn. By the way she was talking excitedly to near every customer at the bar; I was surprised she was paying enough attention to get me a drink. Turning he laughed a bit, and shrugged.

"I've been everywhere what matters. 'Cept Hoofington. Only a fool'd go there." I giggled a bit, my head feeling light from the whiskey. The only remedy for that was even more whiskey. "Even sheriff-ed a town once in NCA Crest territory fore they took it over and I hadda flee. They left me a bullet in my brain-pan as a parting gift." He paused, grinning at my disbelief of him as a law pony. "What bout you Miss Gun?" he said, taking his stool back. "Where have you been?"

"Here. There."

"Oh? Here in Timber, There in Stable 123? Don't tell me you don't have a story. From the looks of you, you used to wrestle Hell Hounds for sport." And dragons. Also this one time with a griffin and a hydra...

"And profit." I replied dryly. "My life was not so interesting." Partly true, I guess. At least it was a boring story. Or. Something. It was hard to think, like somepony parked a cloud over my brain. Needed more whiskey.

"None? Then how'dya explain that daughter of yours? No story about the lucky buck what helped make her?" My... what?

"Serenity, sshe ain't mah daughter." I slurred after I pounded back another glass. Funny, it didn't burn nearly as much that time.

"Just an orphan filly?" His breath tickled my neck, sending shivers down my spine. When did he get so close? "You must be a kind pony." Kindest killer he's ever met, I'm sure. Saving orphans and what have you, I was a damned Alicorn I was so goodly.

"Y-yeah," I chuckled, "Save 'er from slavers..."

Warmth flushed through my body as he kissed me. I was patently glad I wasn't a pegasus right then as I kissed him back.

BANG

"Fuckity fuck fuck." I wrenched my lips away. Whiskey ruined my ability to swear property. I took a long look at him. He wasn't ugly, but he wasn't really good looking neither, and while his teeth were a ruin, his ass was fine. So I was left with a choice, get some of said ass or figure out why ponies were shooting...

Ass it was!

BANG BANG BANG

Nope, I already made my decision. No amount of shooting was going to change my mind.

"Hireeeeeed!" my head snapped to the stairs leading to the second floor where we had made our room. The light pink filly was flying down the stairs, a face of terror on her... face.

Sex was going to have to wait.

Tearing myself off the stool and away from Grimer, I nearly fell when my hooves hit the floor. Damn, why was the

world spinning? It shouldn't spin. As a rule. Serenity seemed oblivious to my plight as she quickly jumped onto my back yelling in my ear, "Raiders outside! They're killing ponies!"

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"W-what! How can I sleep when ponies are dying!" Because ponies die constantly and it's more work saving them then it's worth. Of course I wasn't about to tell a filly that, so instead I stretched and groaned.

BANG.

A bullet shot through the boarded up window and buried itself in the bar an inch from my leg.

Stomping my hoof, the cloud over my head waned and I charged the door, forgetting my lack of firearms.

I burst through the door in a flurry of broken wood and splinters. The single street had become a war zone with over turned carts and barrels used for cover. The NCA was held up on one side, a small band of raiders from the north on the other; both sides seemed to be staring at me in shock.

A black-and-red maned raider got off a single shot before I was on him. The bullet grazed my skin, but I felt nothing. Whiskey is awesome. My metal leg rose and lashed out as I reared. His head resisted for less than a second, before cracking and caving in. His body twitched and fell; his pistol falling from his foaming mouth. I scooped it up and dashed behind a water trough for cover as the rest of the raiders realized what just happened.

My head pounded as bullets shot through my makeshift cover, missing me but splashing my mane with water. "Weww!" I yelled at the NCA troops through the pistol in my mouth, "Cawge 'em!" A battle cry roared over the NCA troopers and bullets started firing. Good.

Turning quickly, I bucked the remains of the water trough towards the gang. It didn't go very far but it was distracting. Turning back, I half charged and half stumbled towards their ranks. My pistol blasted out missing more of its' nine shots then it hit. It was enough though, as one pony in front of me was soaked in blood from a hole in her chest. Hopping over, I charged the nearest pony.

The force of my blow on the poor raider's back was enough to send him to the dirt, squealing like a stuck pig. "Fuck!" One of the raiders backed away from me, "She's a monster." That was so nice of him to say. So nice I could only smile when his bullet ripped through my leg. "She's a fucking Dash-head!"

I stumbled towards him and chucked the pistol at his feet. "It's empty." I had no idea why I said that.

The raider took one look at me, another at the gun, and a third at the NCA battalion crawling up behind me. He ran. The rest of the raider following suite save for a single unicorn that was summarily shot to bloody pieces. Dropping to the ground I rested my head in the dirt.

Yum. Dirt.

I came off my buzz in searing pain as the full extent of my injuries became clear. Two bullets tore straight through my recently healed leg, another scraped across my side. That was not to mention the knife protruding from my meaty flank in the centre of the three rocks that made up my cutie mark. "Got stuck in a muscle." Serenity said as she tore the blade from my side, sending fire lancing through me. Swearing under my breath, I clenched my teeth down on a rolled up blanket that tasted of dirt.

"What the hell was that!" The ghoulish commander, who so kindly took my weapons earlier, screamed at me. The glare I sent him, as Serenity applied pressure with a cloth to my wound, must have said something as he quickly

lowered his voice. "Why would you charge into a raider gang like that? Do you have any idea what they're capable of?" If it wasn't for the fact we were in his camp, under his own personal tent, I would have smashed his ghoulish teeth in.

"They woke up Serenity." I replied, letting the dirty blanket drop to the ground.

"So." His pale eyes leered at me out from his rough sunken face, "You charged a group of raiders because they woke up your daughter? Are you insane!" Yes. Also drunk. The thought reminded me, I bought a bottle at the bar. Reaching into my saddle bag, I tore out the bottle and took a chug. A burning warmth spread down my chest, and already I could feel the pain dulling.

"She's not my daughter."

"Yes I am!" Serenity chirped in merrily behind me, still tending to my injured flank.

"She's not." I repeated. The ghoul would have raised an eyebrow at me if he had one. "Really."

"It doesn't matter." He trotted back and forth in the small tent, his mood switching constantly from rage to barely concealed rage. The NCA had set up a small camp on the outskirts of the small village, but from the way the ghoul was talking they owned the town. Or at least ran it. "I'm thankful for your help, but we do not require your assistance. This is NCA business, and we do not need civilian casualties." See what I mean?

"You've got raiders... uh... raiding your town." I nickered as Serenity trotted over to me and shoved a healing potion down my gullet. Coughing it down, the bullet wounds in my leg started to knit together. "You'll have casualties either way."

"And what do you suggest miss-?" He left it open for me to fill in my name. How nice of him.

"Gun. Hired Gun."

"Convenient." He whinnied, "I'm Lucky." Lucky enough to be turned into a ghoul. The wasteland continued its macabre sense of humour as I took another swallow from my whiskey bottle.

"Well. You've have the pony-power. Take the fight to the raiders."

"No." Now that was just rude.

"Why?"

"All military action is strictly classified."

"Including actions you don't take." Serenity giggled at my side as she fussed over my leg. The flesh had almost completely knitted itself back, but she was obviously still worried about infections and the like. He blinked dumbly at me before responding.

"We have been ordered not to attack, unless they pose a credible threat to the safety of the wasteland. As we have them holed up save for a few isolated incidents, we don't have the authority to carry out such an... extermination." He chewed his lip a bit after he spoke.

"Well. What if they had a hostage?"

Lucky grinned.

I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to say the very next day I found my back legs bound in irons, my

fake leg deactivated, and being led blindfolded into a raider base. Why did it seem I was held captive by one raider group or another every three days or so? If history had its say, the leader of this gang was going to get kicked through a window or shot in the head. So you know, it was going to be a hell of a day.

My head cracked against a low door frame before I was pushed through ducking and cursing. Wherever I was, it smelled damp and dusty. Even though they took off my blindfold after the door clicked behind me, I still couldn't see anything. I guessed somepony forgot to turn on the lights.

"Lights, Turn on." A raider's gruff voice said at my side. Suddenly brightness. My eyes burned and I had to cover them to stop pain flaring up through my head. Suddenly, I knew how Grimer felt. Behind me some pony was laughing, so I reluctantly tore my eyes open, and stared in shock.

I was looking at a room almost impossibly huge; nearly five times as large as Marefort ever was. From floor to ceiling it was coated in pure white bricks, save for thin lines of magical lights shining down across the room. Sitting in huge stacks from wall to wall, and occasionally floor to ceiling was wood. Stacks upon stacks of wood, of all different shapes, cuts, sizes, and textures. Almost all were encased in a strange purple glowing shield. On the far end of the room I could see a small door that suggested this complex lead even further. Why the fuck would anypony need to build this in the centre of a bloody mountain?

"What the hell?" Pain shot through my mouth as the nearest raider struck me. Spitting out a glob of blood, spit, and my shattered tooth, I turned and glare at the attacker but he seemed not to care. Looking at my pipbuck, I saw the place was labelled, 'Reconstruction Center'. Looking closer at the room, I saw that some of the stacks of wood were missing entirely or not nearly as large as they should have been. It made a lot more sense now where Timber got the wood for their town.

The raider camp was just that; A small collection of beds, guns, and dirt near the exit. Only twenty beds, and given there were no more than fifteen raiders who caught me, and none waiting here, I gathered this operation consisted of only them. How the NCA, and all their firepower, was unable to take these guys out was beyond me. "Tie her down."

I was shoved roughly onto one of the bloodstained mattresses, and suddenly I realized how terrible a plan this was. Deal was a deal though, but that didn't stop my mind to think up all the horrible things they could do to me as they bound me to the mattress. Just hempen rope though, so as at least if it came to that I could break free. My metal leg creaked at my side, and I questioned just how strong I could be with it deactivated.

A pale green unicorn with a spiked mane grinned down at me maliciously, and I figured I would find out sooner rather than later. "A fresh mare, heh, strong too." I'd wonder how he could talk with his tongue forked like that. "Betcha have a nice tight a-"

"Somepony shut Snake up." The closest stallion bucked Snake in the chest, sending him slamming into the ground with a thud. "No pony is to touch her. We'll get more money for a Major if she's unmolested and healthy." A bald red stallion walked over to me with a grin, "You best hope they willin' to pay though. Rank don't matter here. We'll fuck you bloody if they don't produce the caps." He chuckled to himself, congratulatory.

The ruse was working then. Lucky had dressed me up all fancy in his green NCA Garb, including his shiny metal badges, and sent me off 'scouting'. All it took then was to wander too close to Raider territory and to take a page from Grimer's book and surrender. Raiders didn't know much, but they knew well enough not to kill a valuable hostage. Even though in reality I was a mostly worthless hostage. Of course, when the report was to be sent they'd write my part as 'an NCA hostage'. It'd be enough for the bureaucracy, I was told.

Serenity hated the idea. In retrospect, I really shouldn't have told her, but there was no way to explain why I was going to be vanishing for a day or so. The only other option was not telling her, and I didn't want to risk her thinking I abandoned her. I didn't mind it when she got mad and yelled, but then she started crying! What was I supposed to do with a crying filly? Comforting fillies was not in my repertoire. I'd hugged her and told her I was going to be fine, but she just pushed me away saying, "that's what they always say." Saying that, "they always die." It almost made me reconsider my course of action... but I'd already made a deal. Hired Gun doesn't break

contracts.

"What the fuck are you looking at." I turned my head back to the bald leader. So lost in thought was I that I was staring at the door on the far end of the complex.

"The door. Where does it lead." My voice sounded annoyingly choked up.

"Fuck if I know." he cantered impatiently in circles around me as the other raiders cooked suspicious looking meat over a large fire. "Sent a few bucks to check that shit out, but only one came back, riddled with bullets. Said it was a stairway to the fucking top of the mountain but was guarded by fucking robots of all things. Ain't got the ponies to check it out further,"

"Could be loot up there." And knowledge. Why did I all of the sudden have the urge to explore this building? To eek out it's secrets and find out who built it and why. Maybe because I already had my suspicions and they needed to be validated. It was like a mosquito bite on my back. No matter how hard I tried I knew I wouldn't be able to scratch it, but damn did it itch.

"Could be our graves, are you a fucking idiot?" Yes. Though I'd to wonder why raiders felt the need to swear every second word. Though, these raiders were different than what I'd expected. Save for the blood stained mattress, their entire camp was surprisingly clean, and there were no mutilated bodies to be seen. Not that I was complaining.

"So. How'd you end up here?" The bald pony raised a hoof and I winced and wriggled the binds on my legs tightening. The blow never came though.

"Gotta go someplace. Used to be traders, some of us. But then you fuckers in green came and arrested us. Said we traded to raiders." he snorted laughter, and Snake laughed too trotting over and sticking his mutilated tongue out at me.

"They did to." Snake hissed at me, his breath dangerously close to my neck, "My old gang and Reddy here traded, sure as fuck."

"Fuck off, Snake." Red said and Snake snapped his head up chuckling to himself.

"Heh. Can't fuck'er, an' now I can't fuck with'er. You're a stickler, you sonofabitch." He nickered trotting over to the nearest stack of wood and leaning on it. Or rather leaning on the barrier covering the wood as he never touched it.

"As I was saying, you and your fucking NCA came, called us out and arrested us for trading with raiders. Who the fuck else are we supposed to trade with I asked, but they didn't care. So we broke out, joined the remnants of the group we used to trade with and came here." he laughed bitterly in my face, "You fuckers turned traders into raiders, and now you reapin' your reward. How's that feel?"

"Like shit." I admitted. Squirming for a second I helped the rope dig into my legs the more I struggled. Fucking things burned. "Would you go back to trading? If we let you?"

His face was blank for a second before he shrugged. "Don't know." And I guessed he didn't care either by the way he walked away.

Time ticked by incredibly slowly as I waited for my rescue. Behind me raiders chattered about their plans, how many kills they each got, and what they were going to do to me once the NCA refused to pay. It took all of my mental strength not to say something as they spoke of how they were going to ram a red hot gun barrel up my ass. It was exhausting and completely destroyed what little pity I'd felt after the bald ponies story.

Eventually I found myself drifting off to sleep, dreaming of all the torture these ponies thought up for me.

I woke up to the sounds of an explosion.

My eyes snapped open and turned to the wreckage of the door. That's one way to get in. My heart started pounding and I tried to remember what I was supposed to do. Bullets flew over head, and screams could be heard as the NCA stormed in, guns blazing. Chuckling, I lowered my head again and waited for rescue.

"You and me." Snake was suddenly standing above me, ignoring the hail of lead. The dread in my gut was only matched by the burning of my shoulder. "We're gunna have fun." Gasping, the mattress I was on lifted into the air and was thrown behind a stack of two by fours that reached to the ceiling.

Oh fuck.

I took a deep breath as Snake cantered after me a sick grin on his face. The ropes burned against my legs as I struggled against them. Turning my head, I could see Snake and his... snake. Both seemed happy to see me squirm. My gut twisted into knots and I resisted the urge to vomit. Fuck, he was getting close. Far too close. The ropes stung, and I uncharacteristically screamed for Lucky to help me, but my voice was drowned out in the din of gun fire. "Take a good look bitch. This is goin to--"

SNAP

One rope broke and my leg snapped out. He seemed not to notice as he reared up ready to -- it doesn't matter -- as my hoof struck him between the legs, and I could feel him squish under the force.

"Fucking bitch!" He fell. Rolling, he drew his hooves to himself in pain. "I was gunna be fucking gentle too, you bitch." One by one my legs snapped free except for my powerless mechanic leg. Standing on my three good legs, I pressed down on the stained bedding trying to wrench it free. The ropes tightened around my metal leg but didn't snap. Turning my head, I saw that twisted bastard rolling onto his feet cursing as he tried his best to avoid becoming a gelding. When he saw my gaze he ignored the pain, and charged.

Quickly, I dropped and rolled onto my back as the rope attached to my metal leg pulled the mattress above me. Lashing out with all three legs, the rope finally broke, and the bed slammed full force into that bastard, sending him sprawling. Scrambling to my feet, I pressed a hoof to my nose and snorted. The small power crystal I'd stored in my nose in case of emergencies fell rolled in my snot. Grabbing it with my teeth, doing my best to ignore the taste of mucus, I slammed it into my metal leg. The sound of the my leg whirling and powering up was the second most amazing sound I'd ever heard.

My head turned to the mattress and the raider squirming underneath. I jumped onto the mattress with my full weight. My legs lashed, pounding into the mattress as blood began to seep out from underneath. The sound of his guts squishing out as I stomped him to death; that the first most amazing sound.

The battle was still raging though. The centre camp was a bloody graveyard, but the surviving raiders were weaving in between giants stacks of wood. The NCA would be hard pressed to search them out in the giant maze-like complex while dodging gun fire and worse. It didn't help that the raiders knew the complex far better than the attacking NCA. Since I was still getting paid, I entered the fray. Charging, I jumped over the body of a red pony who I realized was the bald trader. I felt a twinge of pity for what happened to him, but it melted away when I remembered he allowed scum like Snake to live.

Weaving around a pile of wood I found my first raider. He turned far to late as I kicked out his front legs with my prosthetic sending him face planting into the white brick floor. Rearing, I brought down both legs on his head causing his skull to cave in; spraying blood, brains and bone chips over my face. Spitting, I nearly retched at the taste; but I didn't have the time to be sick so I simply grabbed the fallen pistol, ignoring the taste of blood, and galloped on my way.

Turning one corner or another, I ran face first into three surviving raiders. All wielding automatic weapons. I slid

back from whence I came just in time for bullets to splinter through the wood, spraying the hall. Wait, splinters. Me, being an idiot, didn't realize this was one of the towers that had the barrier deactivated. Most of its' top had been scavenged, leaving only a ten foot high wall instead of a tower reaching toward the ceiling.

As the raiders came running up the way I went, I moved to the opposite side of the wall and gave it a great kick. The wood creaked and groaned and fell. Between the crash, and the shouts, I gathered my ploy had worked. Peeking over the pile of wood, I saw one unlucky pony's head sticking out between logs. A single bullet was all it took to put him out of his misery. My shoulder still burned, though.

"Whats going on?" Turning, I saw three NCA troops standing, guns pointed at me.

"I was the hostage..." I said slowly and pointed my head to the pile of wood, "Should be two more alive under there. If you feel like killing." And with that I trotted off to hunt some more raiders. Any fucker who worked with Snake deserved to die.

I managed to find the last one if you can believe that.

A mare, pretty too, and stupidly I had to wonder what she thought of Snake. She was huddled in the corner of the room crying with her weapon unloaded in front of her. "Puh-puh-please. L-let me go. I-" she sobbed, "I-i never wanted this. T-t-they said if I didn't he-help they'd..."

BANG

Her head exploded.

Tearing my eyes from the blood splattered on the wall, I turned my head to see Lucky, uniform-less, with a smoking gun levitating beside him. "Raiders. They'll do anything to get out of punishment." His eyes caught mine and he chuckled. "What? Trust me kiddo I've lived long enough to know a Raider and how to deal with them," They're basically immortal, ghouls that is. I'd to wonder how old he was though. Maybe he was from Eye Glow, maybe he remembered when the bombs fell.

"You could have come sooner."

"Did they hurt you?" Hah, he actually sounded almost worried.

Looking down I took measure of the rope burns on my three legs, and counted in my wounded dignity before shaking my head. "I'm fine." my head turned to the bloody mess that the Mare's corpse made. "Who's going to clean this up?"

Lucky shrugged his rotten shoulders, "Nopony, who cares. Some fucked up pre-war compound without any real loot." Not any real loot? Maybe he was blind as well.

"Rows upon rows of timber. More then enough to build an entire city."

He snorted. "Yeah, and they're protected by magic. The kind what needs a special code to get through, a code nopony seems to know. The only things useful here were taken. Save for whatever's upstairs, but those damn robots make it impossible. Trust me, I tried it years ago."

Whatever. It was stupid of me to ask. I just needed my pay and to get the fuck out of this stupid town. Me and the NCA squad, who I found out suffered zero casualties, left through the smoking remains of the door into the day. I took one look back into the compound with its bright lights and white and red stained bricks before leaving out the side of the mountain. For the life of me I still couldn't figure out why they'd build something like this in a mountain.

"You're hurt!" Serenity said, weaving between my legs fussing over my rope burns.

"Not that bad." I winced as she poked my wounds and levitated a healing potion to my lips. Waving it away I caught Serenity, lifting her up with my leg. "I'm fine. But we aren't rich enough to drink a healing potion every time I get scratched." She pouted at me, and I very nearly changed my mind. Putting her down, I turned away and took a look around our small inn room, my eyes reaching the single mattress on the floor. It made me sick just looking at it.

"Humph, sorry." She hung her head low and made a whole dramatic thing of trotting slowly over to the bed and flopping down in a ball. I sighed heavily and I could have sworn I heard her giggling. The door opened behind us and I was half pleased half annoyed when Grimer walked through the door flashing a rotten grin.

"You're a lucky lady." He nickered. "Also a bloody idiot, why the hell would you make yourself a hostage? Do you have any idea what raiders do to prisoners?" More than he knew. Being treated by a bloody foal by some cowardly stallion was the last thing I needed.

"What do you want?" I said curtly not bothering to hide my annoyance. Taking one step back, he gulped as his eyes darted about the room.

"S-sorry," He stammered, looking abashed, "I just heard you were back in town and thought we co-"

"I know what you thought." The folly of the day before was becoming clearer by the second. How could I possibly get involved with somepony so weak. Even if it's just for pleasure, he'd think more into it than was there...

... And every time I looked at him, the only thing I could see was Snake's forked tongue.

Gulping again, he backed up through the door he came from, and right into a couple of NCA troops. "Grimer?" One of them asked, faceless beneath a green helmet. Drawing back, Grimer felt it necessary to back up into me instead. If he wasn't already staring death in the face, I would have knocked him out. My shoulder started to burn as the NCA took aim at Grimer. Celestia above knows why.

"Y-yes," He stammered.

"You're under arrest." For what, I nearly said until they read my mind and answered anyway, "For raider activity." How could I not crack a smile at the idea of Grimer being a raider? "Including trading with raiders, slaving and arms dealing." Those last three I'd to admit were not beyond the realm of possibility. It also occurred to me that most of those 'crimes' were far more accurate on my rap sheet, so I didn't say anything. "Come quietly." Or else, the not so subtle threat said.

Not wanting to start a fire fight a foot away from Serenity, I 'gently' placed my metal off on Grimer's back. "You should go." The floating NCA guns cocked. "Now." I shoved him 'ungently' towards the troops who formed around him, and marched him out. His head turn giving me one last pleading look before he vanished through the door. No doubt going to meet the same fate as that red pony.

"You." My shoulder was still on fire, and that did not bode well. Perhaps less for the single helmeted Unicorn standing before me if he decided to shoot. "You were working with him?"

"No." The pony stared silently waiting for me to elaborate, "We're escapees from slavers. Met him and his men and paid for security." He kept staring, what the hell did he want from me?

"We're going to Dise." Serenity perked up behind me from what was supposed to be sleep, "Have family in The Watchers." The NCA troop gulped, stepped back and nodded. "Where you from~?" The pink filly asked pleasantly.

"Crest." He brought himself up, his voice sparking with pride. "Heart of the NCA, don't let anypony tell you different. Second to come out of the Stables, and first to rebuild thanks to Prime Minister Saigns, Goddess'

Bless Him.” The little filly bounced off the bed and hopped towards him in obviously fake wonderment.

“Really? Oh wow I heard about it~ is it true General Scoiatel comes from Crest?” The NCA Pony looked down at the little pony quizzically before nodding. “Oooooooh. That’s Awesome~.”

“Heh. Guess it is.” The burning in my shoulder subsided as he put his gun away. “You two stay out of trouble.” With a nod and flourish he too vanished from my room. A room, I should mention, I took the time to lock when I first entered. Apparently, locked doors didn’t mean as much as I’d thought they did. Even still, I took the time to lock my door again before making my way back to Serenity and her stern grey eyes.

“Did we just sell out Grimey?”

“No.” I shrugged, lying on the floor beside the bed and resting my head on my rope-burned leg. Needed to rest. Feeling weary seemed second nature in the Wasteland, but that didn’t make it pleasant, and I hadn’t slept since the fight at the Warehouse. And the sleep I had there was anything but restful.

“We did so...” She pouted at me.

“He sold himself out. I didn’t force him to work with Raiders.”

“You’ve worked with the exact same ones,” Yes Serenity, I remembered. And then I killed them. Seemed fair to me. There was no point arguing with a filly, so I closed my eyes and turned on my radio.

“Hello and welcome, Dise. You’ve tuned in just in time for your favourite segment, my voice.” I chuckled and rested my head again. Sure as an overcast was Mr New Haygas the best part of the radio, and not for his news. *“Also, the news! Who would have thought? Well, it seems a high ranking Mustang has been seen converting near the Minotaur Base at Canyon Ridge Bridge. Predictably the NCA has something to say about that, straight from General Scoiatel himself,”* After a brief burst of static a gruffer sounding pony was speaking, *“If it is true, and the Mustangs have aligned with the enemy then we will have to speak very seriously with the other gangs of Dise. As much as we support Dise independence we cannot have traitors within the walls of such a great city.”* The military stallion finally shut up and let New Haygas speak, allowing me to finally drift off to sleep to the sound of his smooth voice.

KNOCK

“Mmm,” I mumbled in a half asleep haze, “Don’t think it’ll fit...”

KNOCK KNOCK

My head shot up and I quickly shook away the blush on my cheeks. Damn dreams. Always ended a second too early.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“Stop that.” I growled getting clumsily to my feet. It seemed my metal leg always worked worse when I was sleepy. Looking at the shuttered window, I saw only darkness peaking in. I guess it was too much to hope for a full nights sleep. Who the hell needed sleep anyway? According to everypony, not me.

Walking slowly to the door, I quickly unlocked it (which is harder then you’d expect without magic) and opened the door... to have no less then three ponies rush into my bedroom making such a racket I saw Serenity twitch in the corner of my eye. Was I really going to have beat manners into these intruders? Then again, at least they knocked before barging in. “What?” I said trying to blink sleep out of my eyes.

“Hired Gun?” One of the ponies shrouded in darkness said. I could barely make out her features, but her voice

gave away her gender at least. I nodded. "We... we need somepony with yours skills. You see, we heard about what happened at the warehouse, and if anypony could do it you could, so we're here to ask you for your help an-"

"How much?" I cut her off. Some ponies really did need to learn how to shut up. Eeping, the pony jumped a half step when I interrupted and stared at her feet during my reply. The two, male, ponies behind her did nothing but glare at me.

"F-five hundred caps."

"Six Hundred."

"You don't even know what the job is. How can you bargain?!" The glare I sent her hopefully sent the message that I wasn't negotiating anything. "I mean. Um. Okay the job. I'm sure you've noticed the raiders," I managed to find the only pony in the wasteland stupider than me. "Well we never did have much a problem 'fore the NCA showed, you-you see? They took most of our traders and arrested them as raider sympathizers for 'trading' with them which is stupid because they're traders and that's what they do you know so-"

"Please." my voice betrayed my annoyance, "breath."

"S-sorry. Ahem. So. I was saying. After they took them prisoner they threw them in the mountain complex thingy you were in and even killed the Sheriff when he protested!" By the goddess she actually paused to breath! "They were supposed to be taken down to work the farm. Except they managed to escape, and the NCA have been unable to fix the problem they caused until you showed up, and now they want to rule this town."

"And you don't want that to happen." I stated matter of fact.

She nodded her head curtly in the deep gloom, but my eyes had gotten used to the light so I could actually see who it was I was speaking too. To my surprise, it seemed the bartender of this very inn was my mysterious employer, but then again I really didn't care. "No. We've had it up to our necks with the damned NCA, but they won't leave. They say we need protection from raiders they created. So we need a sheriff."

"I'm not a sheriff. " I had to dispel that rumour as quickly as equinely possible before she got any crazy ideas, "But I know where you can find one who has a lifetime of experience. "

The streets were dark and the sky was moonless. A stupid thing to say as I've never seen the moon, but I just felt it'd set a dramatic scene. Stupid idea, I know. Even still: it was quite dark, so much so that I managed to get my metal leg caught no less than three times (for those keeping track: a pot hole, some abandoned fencing, and a broken water trough). Inching my way down the only street, I slowly closed in on the NCA encampment hoping to Celestia that they'd all be asleep.

They weren't.

A single sentry stood guard over the entrance of the camp. If it was possible I would have snuck around, but a rudimentary fence of scavenged chain-link and barbed wire surrounded the encampment. It would have hurt too much to climb over, and I wasn't positive I could break through without causing a ruckus. That meant I'd to use my guile and quick wit to get through...

"I need to get in," I said sourly, walking up to the guard who seemed to snap his head up at me. Why couldn't their bloody helmets show, you know, their eyes? Would have made it a lot bloody easier if I knew he was asleep.

"W-why? State your name and rank." Rank?

"Hired Gun..." I paused thinking up a rank and coming up blank, "Uh, Hired Gun?" That's a rank right?

"Whats you-Oh" He shook his head for half a second and stood straight up, "You're the mare what was working for Major Lucky, innit?" Blinking, I nodded dumbly, "Aww hell, that stunt ya pulled back at Timber Yard was amazing. Throwing yourself to the wolves jus' for us. Hell, you're amazing. I'd never have the balls ta go through with that, I tell ya what. Pardon my language, you've gotta go, I bet business with the Major. Don't let me keepya,"

"Thanks." I mumbled, lowering my head and walking through the makeshift gate thanking my lucky stars so many ponies equalled my level of stupidity.

The camp was not near as dark as the town, with small candles still glowing inside various tents giving me ample reason to avoid them completely. Luckily, I'd remembered where the 'prisoner tent' was in the complex, having been given a small tour when I was with Lucky the other night. Lowering my massive body, I crept between tents and moved 'silently' towards where I assumed Grimer was kept.

"Who the fuck are you?" A pony cantered towards me, opening a tent flap as he exited. Behind him I saw a glint of pale purple. My pipbuck cracked his temple as soon as he got close sending him sprawling with a thud. He glowered up at me and stumbled to his feet, blood running down his temple.

Fighting here was too loud, dammit, we were going to wake up the whole damn camp. The burning in my shoulder told me I did not have the luxury of thought. Turning swiftly, I bucked him hard sending shock-waves through my legs, and him rolling into the tent. Too loud. Fuck.

Following suite, I galloped through the tent flap meeting Grimer's eyes as I slid to a halt. "What the fuck?" Very good question Grimer, I thought, giving the NCA guard another swift kick his shotgun falling out of his magical grip. "You're here to save me?"

Nope, try again.

"How'd you like to be sheriff."

"What?" He stood up slowly, the shackles on his legs jingling lightly, "What exactly does that entail?"

"Declaring war on the NCA." I intoned dully. By his blank stare, I guessed it wasn't funny. "Usual sheriffy stuff. The alternative are the shackles on your legs." He smirked with his rotten teeth before nodding.

"Aye, sounds like something I could go for." I nodded raising my foreleg.

CRACK.

My metal leg snapped through the chains on his legs with a single strike. Clearly, my leg was made of stronger metal as I quickly knocked off his back-leg shackle as well. There, now all we had to do was-

"What do we have here?" Fuck.

My eyes shot up, meeting pale eyes of Major Lucky. Oh and at least five guards, including the one I met at the gate. His voice was calm, but I could tell with much reluctance on his part. "You're stepping just a bit past where I am comfortable you bein'. Yeah, you helped us a bunch at the Reconstruction Center, but don't think that means I can overlook this. Jail-breaking, resiting arrest, assault. More then enough for a execution order."

"You have no jurisdiction here." Grimer stepped forward, shotgun in his mouth but without a noticeable slur when he spoke. Clearly this was nothing new. "NCA Doesn't rule Timber. Think 'cause you kill the sheriff that gives you rights cause it don't."

"Shut up and lie down!" Major Lucky bellowed. The pale purple pony winced, his head stinging no doubt, and

leaned back so far that I nearly expected him to obey.

BANG

The buck shot tore a bloody hole through Lucky's already mangled ear. "The NCA took everything away from me once. I've tried being nice. I've tried bowing, I've tried listening and running but fuckit I'm tired." Huh, and here I thought he was a coward. "Step the fuck down and leave Timber alone. You wont get your teeth in here."

"Do you really think you can slaughter a whole camp?" If he had eyebrows the ghoul would have raised one, "Even if you did you'd bring upon the wrath of the NCA down on you like you wouldn't believe." Oh good, nopony was paying attention to me. That gave me all the time in the world to reach back into my saddle bag...

... and pull out the last grenade I stole from Nanny Jane.

"Dun gotta." I mumbled awkwardly, the metal apple cool in my mouth, "Explothion, ponies die. Bad publithity." The NCA were not well loved, except when handing out food, and even then they were merely tolerated. A stain on their reputation like, say, a riot, could have disastrous consequences and he knew it. The way he took a step back gulping, confirmed that fact.

"You'd die." He pointed out.

I shrugged. "Got a Contract." Truthfully, I was hoping the threat was enough, but if it came to that I wasn't planning on backing down. In the wasteland, you had to have a virtue, and I promised myself I'd never break a contract. No matter what came of it. *Survive*, a voice whispered in my ear.

"Yes." His corpse like head nodded. "We'll leave." He smirked a bit, stretching his face revoltingly.

"Good." Grimer stomped his hoof. "Though's a shame. Was looking forward to killing ponies." Grimer smirked, showing his rotten teeth. With a wave of the hoof and a chuckle, Lucky dismissed his bucks save the injured guard on the ground. I kicked him again for good measure.

"So that's it huh? You'd betray anypony for a few caps." Lucky said, backing up a few steps into the night, the candle casting shadows across his face. "Work for Him," His head motioned to the rather smug looking new sheriff, "then me, Then him again. That the way of it."

Grimer suddenly stood up straight and clamped a hoof on my shoulder, "You're not thinking of trying to buy her off because she wo-" I turned away, quickly sending his hoof off my shoulder and stomping on the ground, "Would you?" he gulped at me.

"No. Gotta keep him as sheriff."

"What if there was another contract? Nothing in Timber, would you be interested?" Of course I was.

And thus ended my and Serenity's adventure in the little town of Timber. Even though Serenity did very little, being sick the whole time, I knew she'd be upset if I didn't include her. Sheriff Grimer was reminisce to inform me that the NCA still had their confiscated goods when they left town (except for my rifle which was returned to me after I helped the NCA out the first time). Still, the talkative bartender, whose name I never had the pleasure of knowing, gave me all the caps promised and a couple bottles of whiskey for the road.

It hadn't occurred (Funny how often things don't) to me how long we had stayed there until Serenity complained about having to leave. Between the confiscation of our goods, and me rescuing Grimer from the jail cell I helped put him in; it was two full days, and another day and a half before we actually left the the town. I could recollect the injuries I suffered in said time, but frankly that'd take far too long. Still, it was a good few days, judging only by the caps weighing down my saddlebags.

“Hey.” Serenity walked up to me. Oh yeah, Serenity was feeling better too. I'd taken to standing on the crest of a small hill that shadowed our camp site. “What'cha lookin' at?” With a smile I motioned my hoof towards the horizon. Serenity squinted her small grey eyes, “Dun see nuffin.” Leaning down, I took the little filly by the scruff of her neck and deposited her onto my back. “Oh. I see!”

So did I. There on the horizon highlighted by the red clouds burning from the east, as the sun began to rise, was a great wall. Inside the wall stood dozens of tall buildings peaking above it; sparkling lights shining in only one of every five buildings. Above them, all four tall building stood like monuments to the glory of the past, their lights shining brighter than any star I'd never seen. The tallest of which stretched so high I thought it was touching the cloud line, and at it's tip was the giant head of a pink pony. Its eyes glowing eerily. For days I've heard of Dise. I never believed them until I saw it shining like polished steel. This was Dise: The greatest city in the world. And with help from the Watchers, maybe a place where the small filly on my back could find her home again.

And damn, was it beautiful.

Footnote:

Level up!

Skill note: Sneak 25

(A/N: First and foremost I gotta give mad props to Kkat and her world that without this thingy here wouldn't exist. Also my editor without whom this would be a garbled mess of unreadable messiness, theBSDude.)

[Index](#)