

Graveyard Of Good Intentions

"Half of the results of a good intentions are evil; half the results of an evil intention are good."

Just because you try to do good doesn't mean what you are doing is good. Ponies and zebras waged bloody war for decades, each side sure it was something they had to do, that the other side was evil, that it was the only choice. Their intentions were to save their race, but in the end they doomed it to two hundred years of standing on the edge of the abyss. Wallkirk tried to do good by building elaborate tunnels and bunkers under the city he basically ran, but they did not protect enough, and entire families were irradiated or ghoullified.

Baptisia too had intended to do good, or at least I believed that was her intent. She seemed convinced that subjecting ponies to tests and trials was going to end the war. That whatever it was that she was trying to do would stop the war faster than a traditional weapon. She failed, of course, and was dragged off to be used as a test subject. A karmic way to go, but she was trying to be good, even if all she did was kill and fail.

So I felt a profound sense of connection to the mare when I opened the door to the project she thought would save everypony. I knew what it was like to try to do good, only for it blow up in your face. What we did was different, as were the results, but failing was something I could relate to. I felt a little bit of pity for the mare; even after all the ponies she'd killed, she was trying to save everypony.

At least her intentions were good. To save ponies. So much of the blood on my hooves was from actions not taken to help, but because I was a selfish pony only looking out for herself. Sure, I could make an argument that the ponies I had killed were bad, but I had still killed them out of selfishness. I had to remind myself that no matter what I saw in there, no matter what Baptisia did, she was still a better pony than I.

The room was large and empty. Its sixteen white walls seemed to shine in the bright lights. On each wall was a small number in a red circle. It went clockwise from one to eight, and then again. The ceiling was made of many glass panels with lights arranged under them in a way that made them look haphazardly placed at first, but the more I looked, the more sense the pattern made. The floor was a shallow conclave that I hadn't noticed in the video, and, except for the pony-sized stand in the centre, was made of thousands of small marble tiles in white and grey, arranged in an archaic pattern. Just looking around me, my shoulder surged with a strange energy that was not fire. The place just felt powerful and mystic.

"A megaspell chamber," Flare said beside me, his pink eyes wide in awe. "I've never seen one, if you were going to ask, but, hell, look at it! If this isn't one, I'll eat my tail!" Being a stupid, non-magical earth pony, my knowledge on magic was limited. Hell, I wasn't even sure what exactly a megaspell was, except that it was like a spell, only more. Despite my lack of knowledge, it was quite clear what this place was.

"Woah," Serenity said as she started walking the circumference of the room, seemingly studying it. "This place is so cool. Look at it." Her horn was glowing lightly though she wasn't casting a spell. I could only guess she was thinking using her magic may help her get a feel for what the room was. Or that it looked cool. With Serenity either one was possible. "I mean, just so awesome. Ain't no super magic-y pony, but c'mon. Look at it!"

Yeah, it was impressive to look at... but that was about it. There was nothing there. Just a big fancy empty room. I had hoped to find... I wasn't even sure, but something. This was the pinnacle of the information I had found in the lab after all. This was the end result... but it was just empty. There was no big reveal. There was only a lingering sensation of disappointment.

"Don't You See!" The voice came from behind us, where the double doors leading into the lab were still open. Apparently speakers were never installed in the megaspell chamber. "There Was No Great Secret To Find. You Have Fallen Into My Trap. By Planting That Information Around I Led You To A Place You Could Not Escape." On cue, four Protectitron MK II's rolled around the corner towards us.

"Well... fuck."

Please shut up.

Wait, what was that? It was in my head, but it wasn't a voice I recognized like every time before. But upon the voices command, the two doors slammed shut and I could hear them locking.

The voice was annoying. An earth pony though, she is interesting. An earth pony comes from beyond these hallowed halls and stands against the realities this one offers her. Many have tried, some have succeeded, but she offers an interesting challenge.

I turned very slowly to my companions who shared looks of confusion on their faces. It was clear at that moment they could hear the voice as well. Well, at least at this point I was not going completely insane.

"Well," Flare said, "this is nuts. You're like a weird voice thing, and you argue with the other weird voice. I just imagine you have shouting matches all over the mountain!" The voice in our collective heads seemed to shut up at that. "Or do you talk dirty to each other after you pick the bones of adventurers who dare enter." I really shouldn't have laughed. It was just so inappropriate I couldn't help myself.

So an earth pony has chosen her fate. The door started to unlock.

"Wait!" Flare said when he heard. "Just kidding, really. Ha. Ha. Ha."

The door locked again much to every ponies relief.

An earth pony is at this one's mercy here, she best not forget it. Tell this one, why did an earth pony break away from what she wanted? Why resist?

I turned and looked around the room to find there was no change whatsoever. Wherever this mind-talking thing was, it apparently wasn't here. Unless we couldn't see it. It'd be more than a bit disconcerting if it could go invisible too, and it didn't help that my shoulder was acting strange enough that sensing magic was basically out of the question.

And he was talking about the dreams I'd been having. Of course, I wasn't the only one to wake up from the dreams, as Flare did as well, but he still directed his question at me. So I had to answer. "They were fake. Not real. Fabrications. So I left. Why wouldn't I?" Not that I was sure how I left. It seemed accepting it was a dream and wanting out was the trigger for it breaking down. "And they were creepy. Putting me in a coffin. How would that work?" I resisted calling the strange voice a dumbass.

An earth pony does not understand. This one did not choose your reality. An earth pony's mind builds it from your desires; this one is not privy to the nature of her reality.

"I'm not suicidal." Even as I glared around the room, visions of cliffs flashed in my eyes. No, I couldn't think of that. "You did something. Stupid. This is stupid. I broke free because whatever you did failed."

This one created no realities. This one has been using this spell on many patients long before an earth pon-

"Wait." I cut off the voice. Flare and Serenity who had just been listening turned to look at me. "What is your number."

My number. Five-Six-Eight-Nine-Four-Seven-Seven. Five for the years in college. Six siblings. Eight times a patient committed suicide. Nine weddings patients invited me too. Four children. Seven times they whipped me when I forgot. Seven days before I could feel again...

Even in my head I could feel the words coming out as if by instinct.

How did you know that.

Hah, I one upped the magical talking voice. Flare, at least, didn't understand, "The hell was that? Did you brainwash the goddess voice, Hired? What did I tell you about doing that. Don't They get pissy about it." Flare laughed. "Seriously though, what the hell?"

"The voice... he was a test subject here. Before the war. His name was-"

DO NOT SAY IT!

The voice was like driving a spike through my skull. I couldn't help but drop to my knees and place my hooves over my ears in a fruitless attempt to turn it off. The voice died as soon as it came, but I was floored, as were Flare and Serenity. My daughter even attempted to put a sound barrier around her to avoid it, but you can't turn off what's in your head.

His voice came back, but softer, and less mechanical than before. *An earth pony is surprising. She feigns stupidity but catches on quickly. This one is conflicted.*

"Oh no," Flare replied as he, for some reason, flew up to the ceiling and tapped on the glass. "She really is stupid. It's that she's so stupid, sometimes she forgets she's stupid." He was speaking at the ceiling... did he think the pony was up there? I guess it was a better guess than I had.

"What are you?" Serenity spun in a circle, making sure to glare at everything. Just in case.

This one is a god. A unicorn would not understand the power I possess.

"I have a guess." I sat up slowly. My mind still felt like liquid sludge, and my body was tearing apart at the seams, but I think I'd this figured out. This room, the information, it was all so... obvious. "This place is a megaspell chamber. Right?" Flare and Serenity nodded. They probably didn't know for sure, but I had to

trust their judgement. "They were doing experiments on ponies. Here. or." I looked at the large double doors. "Out there. I saw you. In the camera, you were here. I think." The hairless pony with burning eyes. "You're a megaspell." There was a pause as I looked around the room. Sixteen walls, each had a number painted on them. This was a clue... I could do this. "You were made into a megaspell..."

Silence, this one will not stand for your accusatio-

"Oh! I get it." Flare looked down at me with a smug grin. "This room has sixteen sides. Numbers go from one to eight like a clock. This is a time megaspell, right? That's my guess! How many points do I receive?"

Stop th-

"Huh?" Serenity jumped up so we would notice her. "Can ya even do that? Attach a megaspell ta a pony, wouldn't it kill them? Magical overload and what not." Serenity knew more about magic, so I'd to defer to her judgement.

Are you do-

"Oh, and maybe..." Flare paused. His wings flapped twice before he slowly glided to the ground. "Actually, I had nothing else to add, I just thought it'd be funny... Don't zap me with lightning. Please."

There was an sound in the back of my head that sounded like a cry of exasperation. Apparently we weren't very good at listening to monologues. Maybe it was because we seemed to get one every three days or so, and we weren't in the mood for listening. Maybe because we'd spent the last day being mindfucked with and shot at. So fuck the magical voice.

This one is surprised, but this one should not be. This one gave an earth pony too much information to lure her here. The closer an earth pony is to this one's body, the stronger this one becomes, and the easier to give her the sleep she desires.

"But I broke out, right? You failed. You're terrible at being godly." The god seemed to pause, so I kept talking. "I mean. I, stupid Silver, broke out. Then I broke Serenity out. She was, what? Twenty meters away from here? Maybe you aren't as powerful as you think."

This one has been infused with the power that has destroyed entire cities. This one will not be mocked.

Did he have that power? I wasn't so sure. He could certainly fuck with our minds, and make our dreams adhere to our wishes, but he couldn't read minds, and the only physical presence he had was to close the doors to his room shut. He was powerful, but as strong as balefire? If Flare was right, this was some sort of time spell... would that really need as much energy as world destroying missiles? Not every megaspell had to be exactly as powerful.

A memory came back. Back in the tunnels. The orb that was there glowing with a strange power that made us hear words, and when we closed our eyes it gave us our favourite memories. This was... something similar. He was...

"You..." I said to the voice. "Wallkirk tried to drain your power..."

This one's soul was torn asunder, and its pieces scattered. One to the deep abyss taken, another to the sky, a third north and north until there was only snow. The evil pony tore and killed me in pieces, but even a dead god can dream. Even a dead god can bear retribution. Only life can pay for life, and this one took the life of the pony whose magic tore us. This one denied the evil pony of his desires, and thus, this one was victorious, even in death.

"He doesn't sound very dead. Dead ponies dun talk s'much. I checked." Serenity had a good point. How could a pony who claimed to be dead be monologuing like that? On the other hoof, that orb had creepily similar powers. Creepy enough to send shivers down my spine.

What would a unicorn call being torn asunder from the inside? Less of this one's soul is here than exists elsewhere: this is being dead. ...The invading ponies have seen a piece, haven't they? That is how they broke free. This one's lost souls are as strong as this one, but dead, less precise, but practice is practice and now it is no wonder the invading ponies were able to fight this one.

"What's the voice talkin' bout now?" Serenity said as she continued to walk around the perimeter of the large room. "He's annoying. He's in my head an' talkin' all funny." Right Serenity, the voice talked funny and nopony else. "Since when are gods supposed to talk so much..."

"Now, apparently." Flare flew down beside her on the other side of the room. "He's talking about... do you remember the tunnels?" Serenity blinked at him. "The dark ones? With the visions and shit?" Serenity's eyes went wide, and even from across the room I could see her shudder. "Yeah, exactly."

The invading know of the location... they must tell this one! Tell this one where these tunnels are!

"Uh, no." I answered. Why the hell would I give the unstable megaspell more power? Besides. He was planning on killing us anyway, and it was the only bargaining chip I had.

An earth pony will tell this one. Or this one will

"Kill us!" Flare jumped up. "That's what you were gonna say right? Right? Because weren't you going to do that anyway? Or was the whole luring us here just for fun? So how about we make a deal. We don't want to die, well I don't want to anyway, apparently Hired's psyche is less sure, but still. The deal. Lets say you help us escape this place of hellish-hell place and we'll go grab your soul chunk and carry it up to you. Howsabout it?"

This one has no reason to believe you.

"Does it matter? You know we've seen a piece, so you know, that we know, that you know, that we know where it is. If you want it back, you have to play by our rules, and our rules say get us the fuck out of here." Flare grinned, knowing full well he had won. "Now this place is like, city-sized right? There is no way it had only one entrance, but the Steel Fucks only know of one. Show us another entrance; we leave, then come back and throw this orb at your face. It's really your only chance.

"What about the giant robots'n'stuff right outside tha door?" Serenity posed the logical question, of course. "Even if he told us how'ta get out, we're like, kinda trapped in this room. Unless it has a secret exit." She jumped suddenly looking excited, "OH! Does it have a secret exit? That'd be so cool! C'mon, does it?"

It does, but this one has still not decided to let you go.

“Why not?” Asked Flare. “We already figured out the puzzle. Everypony knows the only time spell allowed you to go back in time once, and only for a few minutes, but never forward. So They tried to bond a time megaspell to you, so you could go back and forth at will and tell them how the war ended, and how to end it sooner. Of course they didn't expect this, but it was a nice thought. So we win the game!” He grinned. “And you know you can't kill us because we have the information you need, and you already said you can't read minds. So let us go. It'll be fine, really.”

So that was it. All the deaths in these labs were to create him, a failure to end all failures. Instead of looking into the future, they did little more than power up his magical abilities to some sort of extreme state and make him almost immortal. It wasn't a bad idea in theory though. Hell, if the war hadn't ended the way it had, it could have worked. Actually, when you think about it, even if he did travel to the wasteland and back (assuming he didn't die) that would be enough to possibly end the war before everything had gone to shit. If the ponies, zebras, minotaurs, and whoever else knew the consequences, it might have been enough to stop all of this. Baptisia was almost a heroine, and all the death she caused would have been worth it. Instead, she was carted away like the criminal she was, and experimented on. At least, I think that was her fate. The memory I got had been very vague, most likely altered.

Of course, he'd said before he couldn't put specific memories in our heads. But that was exactly what he'd done, twice! Well, three times, if you include that dream I had. So he was lying to us, or I misunderstood. Still, I was fairly sure he couldn't read our thoughts, only project them into our heads. I guess if I was going to convince him to let us go I was going to have to put that to the test.

The scarier thought was if any of this was real. If he could make us see things, and dream things that weren't ours, how did we know this whole thing wasn't just an elaborate dream and he was sucking life from us, or whatever he did. There was no way to be sure, was there? I could only really guess and hope I wasn't getting duped. The thought made my heart beat faster than it had been, and considering how it was already going crazy that couldn't be good. Just needed to calm my thoughts. Take a deep breath.

“You killed them all didn't you?” My voice cut through the silence. “This facility. The dead ponies you...”

They were dead before this one touched their minds. This one gave them peace instead of horror for their last hours.

“All of them. None could have survived?” My voice felt raspy and shaky.

None. The evil pony that designed this place did not understand. The radiation would not have gotten into the heart of the mountain, but this place only had enough food for six months. Even if most had died, it would last five years, and by then the blanket of radiation would kill them if they stepped towards the exit. This one did a horrible thing to save them from a worse fate.

“So you killed them.”

Ended their suffering. This one is evil, and you can expect evil things from it. An earth pony would do well to remember it. This one is a monster.

"You're not. You're a pony. Monsters don't have names."

This one has no name.

"Simple Heart. You told me to remember. So I did." I think he did, but I was gambling on his morality here, if he had any left. What happened to him was beyond words, and he had a god complex to be sure, but he was still a pony. If he could see that, maybe he'd help us escape.

The voice in our head was silent.

"How did you know his name, Hired?" Flare grabbed Serenity and flew over beside me. "Because if he kills us over this, I'd like to know what to curse."

"Use my name." I smiled grimly. Not that I knew what a grim smile looked like. "Just to be safe."

The pegasus nickered and reached out a hoof to pat me on the back. He stopped when he noticed a lot of my back was a mess of unhealed burns from the robots. "Right. I can do that. How about it, Serenity? You wanna curse your momma with your dying breath?"

"Ya huh. Sounds like fun. Can I, Momma?"

"Go ahead," I smiled. "Why not? I deserve it." Finally the voice started to talk again. He must have been tired of our banter.

That is not this one's name. This one has decided to let the invading ponies die.

Oh, hell no! I charged towards the centre of the the room. The epicness of it was almost cut short when I nearly slipped on the polished white marble, but I found my balance and kept going. I could hear him in my head, telling me to stop, but I already figured this part out. When I reached the centre I turned around and bucked with what little strength I'd left. My hooves connected to something.

The impact shook my body, but I didn't move. I just stood there with my hooves against the invisible force. In my mind, I heard the voice grunt. When I turned my head to see what I had hit, there was nothing there. Until nothing flickered. There was a brief flash, and before me stood a pony with a coat, but without a face. He stared at me with eyes like suns. I felt my shoulder flare up in pain from the pure magic that engulfed this pony but, I did not back down.

In a fluid turn, I grabbed my shotgun from my pack and pressed against his faceless head.

This one is a god. His eyes flashed as the words struck like daggers in my skull. Do you think you can kill a god?

"Does an Earth Pony think she can kill a god." I corrected him. His lapse in speaking style only confirmed to me that I was scaring him. "You said it yourself, 'Even a dead god can dream.' Which means you can also die." My shotgun cocked. It was empty, of course, but he couldn't read my mind so he had absolutely no way of knowing that. "I've tried appealing to your pony side. I've tried bargaining. I've tried talking. I'm tired of talking. I've been lectured by better ponies. And for better reasons. You will help me and my daughter leave. Or I'll kill you. We'll still die. But so will you."

An earth pony cannot be stupid enough to threaten this one.

“Oh, I can.” Threaten him with an unloaded gun no less. “I’ve been shotgunned in the face. But the pony that shot me missed. The goal is to hit the head. The brain. I won’t make that mistake. It’ll only take one shot to end you.” At that moment I was positive I was going to die. I was threatening a two-hundred-year-old abomination with an empty gun. But I didn’t waver. As weak as I felt, as dizzy and nauseous, I’d still promised Serenity I’d get her through. And I’d promised Wildfire I’d survive. If not for me, than for the ponies who (for reasons I couldn’t understand) needed me.

This one...

“Had three seconds.” My teeth dug into the handle of the weapon. “I wasn’t kidding. You’re a pony. I’ll find your soul for you. I don’t want to kill you. So don’t make me. Let us go and you have my word.”

There was a long second of silence.

This one will help you...

There was a collective sigh from the three of us. My ruse worked. Thank Celestia that even gods fear death.

This room has an emergency exit. In case the spell went wrong. An elevator that leads to the tram system. At the bottom of the elevator there is a map. It will list all exits. Is this sufficient?

“Yes.” I sighed. “Yes.” Even though I took a step back I didn’t put my shotgun away. Even if it was useless, I had to keep up appearances. “I promise. I’ll find the orb. Bring it back.” If he wanted to he could wait until we left and then mind rape us some more, but I had to trust him. Even if it was only because it was the only real option we had. So I rolled the dice and prayed.

The wall opposite the doors was designed to be easy to break. Beyond that is the exit. This one will not stop you.

I gave a slight nod to Flare. He saluted, then flashed through the air and slammed into the wall so hard it turned into dust. A few second later, he came out and waved a wing of approval. There was our best chance for leaving. Very carefully, I circled around the megaspell pony, keeping my shotgun trained on him. Ever so slowly I backed up towards the exit with Serenity following beside me.

“Sorry.” I said honestly to Simple Heart. “Really. You deserve better.”

I turned and ran into the elevator beside my companions. It was a rather large ugly metal thing that seemed to be designed to hold at least two dozen ponies. Maybe more. The metal grate of a door slammed shut when we all entered, and I was very glad I couldn’t see down.

“Going down.” Flare pressed the only button on the control panel and we started to descend.

I dropped the shotgun and went to say something but couldn’t. A laugh just started to build in my chest, and I couldn’t contain it. Something about this whole situation was so funny that my whole body shook

with laughter. Flare stood over me and I tried to stifle the giggle long enough to say something. It didn't work because he fell on his rump and started laughing too. It was just too much. This whole situation. Serenity joined us too, because apparently we were hilarious.

Eventually we got control enough to speak, but it was still hampered by giggles.

"Did you just... threaten a fucking god?" Flare said trying to contain himself.

"With an empty gun." I kicked the shotgun sending it spinning across the elevator floor. "We should be dead."

"Oh Hired, words cannot express how much I hate you, and how much I love you right now." Flare laughed again as we continued to descend into the depths of the facility. Maybe Simple Heart was just playing us, but it was so worth it even if he was.

The elevator lurched, and for a split second I thought I was falling. There was a look of horror on my face, before relief washed it away. That moment was enough though. We weren't out of the water yet, not by a long shot. So I couldn't get comfy, the worst was still yet to come. Who knew what awaited us in the bottom of the facility.

The darkness was all-encompassing, and not even the light of my pipbuck and eye could stop it. It was like a great black void in that sucked in light and gave nothing in return, and the longer I stared into it the more I felt it staring back at me. When I was told the elevator lead to the tram line I'd expected that it would be, you know, lit, and actually lead to a platform. Except when we got to the bottom we walked out over some tracks in the middle of the tunnel. Thankfully Simple Heart was right in one respect; there was a map just outside the elevator.

It was surprisingly helpful. The map gave us a lovely 'you are here' icon, and showed routes to the major areas in the facility. There was a section for 'Weapons Manufacturing,' 'Stable-Tec Storage,' 'Offices,' 'Magical Experimentation,' 'Mechanical Experimentation,' 'Training,' and a few labelled with 'Exit.' The closest exit was near the storage area, so I mentally crossed that one off and looked for the next one. It seemed to be right inside the manufacturing area... oho! I got the brilliant idea of stopping off there before leaving. More guns could only be a good thing, and if nothing else we could sell them later.

Serenity was very helpful and tore the map off the wall before rolling it up and storing it away. Magic really was useful in situations like these.

"Dark, creepy tunnels," Flare remarked, seeming almost unimpressed. "What's the likelihood of this one being filled with ghouls?" Serenity seemed to shudder at that. It had been a while, but the memory of killing that pony must have still hurt. Not everypony could be cold about it like me, and I was glad in a way, that she disliked it. "Oh, the flashbacks." Being on the ground, having the life choked out of me, wondering if we'd ever escape, the feeling of hopelessness... oh yes, the flashbacks.

"Let's just go." I pushed past him, deeper into the darkness.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Flare followed after me with a weaker version of his trademark grin. "Did

you find another exit?"

"Yes. There was a factory too. The exit is in there. We're going to get big guns. Get out of here. And torch High Stakes and my brother. If they haven't left." There was a sparkle of amusement in Flare's eyes.

"Alright! I love this plan! Bloody vengeance and what not!" Sometimes it was really hard to tell if he was mocking me or not. Everything he did was in such a Flare way it made it very open to interpretation. "Lets go kill some folk. After we survive whatever horror is waiting for us down this dark tunnel of course. They better not have done anything with Bunker Buster; I miss her." I could sympathize with that. Poor Subtlety... but that gave me a thought.

"Serenity, do you still have your gun?"

Serenity looked up from the rock she had been studying. "No, I..." She blinked. "Wait." Turning around, she dug into her bag for a second before producing her zebra pistol. With a slight blush she said, "Um, I forgot about it..." I had, too, so I couldn't blame her. After the Crimson Hoof took mine and Flare's weapons, they didn't even check Serenity, and, in the commotion of us being dragged off and me nearly dying, it had slipped our collective minds.

"It's fine." I ruffled up her mane a little bit, and noted how much she really needed to take a bath. "Take care of it for now. I might need to borrow it, if we find anything that needs be shot, that is."

"You're not really gunna shoot my uncle, are you?" Her, what? Oh, did she mean my brother? I wasn't really sure why she should care about that. Sure, in some strange, convoluted way they were related, but he was still a huge asshole who didn't deserve to be cared about like that. The only time they had interacted was when he had helped chain her up again, so why would she care?

"Maybe." I sighed and kept walking in the dirty darkness. "He's not a good pony... he wanted to kill me." He used to play tag with me, and when we wrestled, I'd always let him win. "He went down the wrong path. He works with raiders." He used to read to me when mom was busy, and let me borrow his toys. "I tried to save him, and he threw it in my face." They took him away from me. "I..." My voice cracked.

"Momma, are you cryin'?"

"No." I kept walking as tears stung my good eye. It was nothing, just bad memories I couldn't get rid of. Well, the memories were good, but what they represented was just bad. Not that it mattered. In the end, it was going to come down to the two of us and a gun, and when that happened, I had to be the strong one. After everything he'd made me suffer through, after the years without him even trying to contact, only for me to find him like that... No. He had to die, but only if he made me kill him.

No pony spoke for a while after that, and I couldn't blame them. After everything that had happened, I was sure they were avoiding conversation so I wouldn't have yet another mental breakdown. Not that I could really blame them. I felt like I was standing on the edge. What I really needed was a day to rest, where I could just process all the horrible shit that went down, just some time for my brain to reset. Instead, I kept getting pushed closer to the cliff, and at this point, it was just going to be one more push before I fell.

Of course, me going insane wouldn't exactly be a long fall.

I wasn't as bad as when I had started, though. At least, I think I was getting better at some things. Somehow I had managed to break into my friends dreams and help them come back to reality. Not to mention survive a deadly maze of giant robots while sick, and then talk down a deadly god-thing. So despite all my failings I was managing to survive, and to help my friends get through it all too. So that was something. Maybe I was borderline insane, and probably a med-x junkie, but I was surviving and growing. Also, I was getting really sappy.

The tunnel kept extending further, and the more we walked, the more it felt like we weren't making very much progress. It didn't help that I kept stumbling on the dirt floor. It wasn't made for ponies to walk on and was covered in holes and rocks, and I was tired and sore and weak. If only we could find a place to rest then we could move on. Flare looked like he could use some rest too. His Enclave armour was still partially melted onto his back, and he seemed to wince at nothing as we walked.

The only pony who seemed really ready to keep going was Serenity. Thankfully, she had been asleep for most of the time in the lab and hadn't gotten shot up like Flare and I. Mind you, if she had been awake, then maybe we would have been able to make use of her gun, seeing as she was the only pony who was armed. It probably wouldn't have done much good against those metal monsters, but it would have been something.

"So I've decided," Flare said as the tunnel started to take a gradual turn, "I blame Curly Fries." I looked down at Serenity to make sure we were still going the right way. When she nodded I turned back to Flare who was grinning in my pale pipbuck light.

"Really, Flare? Knight Curly Fries?" What did he do? Sure he was an ass a while ago, and then got bitch slapped and kicked out of the Steel Rangers, but that didn't have much to do with our current predicament.

"The way I see it is that if Curly hadn't gone and get himself kicked out of the Steel Fuckwads, then he'd still be with them. He'd obviously be assigned to the mission in this stupid centre, and his failure to be anything other than a joke would counter Blackwater's over the top evilness. So we would have been able to escape as they butted heads, and wouldn't have had to go through this at all."

"That..." I blinked. "Almost made sense." Almost, not quite, but it was a valiant effort. Hell, I almost wanted to agree. It seemed a lot easier to blame Curly Fries every time something went wrong.

"Well, I tried." He flapped his wings once. "What's that?" He waved a hoof in front of us. Now that he mentioned, it the light of my pipbuck did seem to be hitting something a little further into the tunnel.

The object slowly came into view and we couldn't have been more lucky. Filling the majority of the tunnel was a large structure of metal and wood, standing perfectly still on the rails that ran through the centre of the tunnel. The vehicle seemed to be fairly open, with a ceiling and floor, but no walls except for safety railings, support beams, and a damaged windshield in the front that glinted in the light from my pipbuck.

"A tram! Cool!" Serenity ran over the dirty ground and managed to jump onto the back of the vehicle. A few seconds later, the back railing opened and a set of emergency stairs came off the back. Standing at the top of the stairs, Serenity struck her best heroic pose. "Please come aboard."

With a half chuckle, I climbed up the stairs. The tram was smaller than I had expected, with a series of

small wooden benches in a single cart. There was an engine at the front of the tram, near the glass window and what must have been the drivers seat. Unfortunately, many of the seats were still occupied by skeletons. Simple Heart's last legacy. With a simple look between me and Flare, we got to work clearing out the bones.

When we were done, I sat down. Why had we even done that? It wasn't like we could even make the thing move. Whatever was powering the other parts of the facility left the tram lines in darkness, so what good was it to clear it out? It just seemed like the right thing to do.

"We should rest here," Flare said, lying on a bench. "I need rest. You need rest. Serenity needs rest."

"No, I don't!" Serenity, to nopony's surprise, found her way to the engine. Standing over it, she undid her saddlebags and laid them beside her. "Got plenty'a sleep in that stupid dream. You two can rest, though. I'll stand guard." I gave Serenity a look. Or rather *the* look. "Oh, c'mon, Momma. You need sleep, an' Flare does too. I 'ad more'an both'a ya, and I didn't get shot at, like, at all. You two sleep, and I'll work on this engine. Bet I can get it working by the time you wake up."

"How, exactly?" I punctuated with a yawn. I couldn't really disagree with her on the "needing rest" part. "You need tools and..."

She pulled out a series of wires, gems, and tools from her saddle bag. Apparently, she was a lot more prepared than I gave her credit for. "Always keep tools on me, an' I scavenged some robots when we first got locked in here, remember?" Oh yeah. "Ain't really my field'a expertise, but it seems simple enough. Some trial an' error'll get it fixed in a jiffy. If anything goes wrong, I'll wake you and Flare, okay?"

Flare laughed a little bit. "Sounds like a deal. But what if Mr. God Complex tries to do his dream-invading thing again? Could be trouble." That was a concern, but if he was going to do that despite our little talk, we were as good as dead anyway.

"He could even if we're awake. Remember." I rested my head on the floor. "Serenity." I looked up at her. The force of her smile made the dark tunnel somehow brighter. "I trust you. If anything happens, wake us."

My daughter saluted me before turning back to her work. Before I closed my eyes, I caught a look from Flare that made it clear he wasn't so sure it was a good idea. I did my best to comfort him with a look, and it seemed to work. Just to make sure, I said. "If you get sucked into a dream. I'll kick you out again. Beating you up was fun."

My dreams were the pillar of normality, and for that I was glad. Of course, for me 'normal' dreams often include haunting memories, dark shadows, lengths of rope, dripping of blood, and the smell of smoke, all tied together with a feeling of dread that lasts for hours after I wake up. I guess it means something when my 'abnormal' dreams are much more bearable than my normal dreams, but you can only trudge through so much shit before it starts caking on your hooves.

I fell asleep to the subtle sounds of Serenity tinkering and woke up a few hours later. My whole body felt as weak as a kitten, and my head was pounding against my skull, but I couldn't afford to show weakness.

Even if I felt like I was about to vomit... again.

"Should be sleepin', Momma." Serenity said as she took her head out of the engine. "You need'a sleep."

"Can't." Which was the truth. At that point I was so sore, it was seriously going to impede my chances of catching a few winks.

"Tha's fine." She floated a few wires over. "Stupid thing is more difficult than ah thought..." She muttered to herself before looking over at me again, her grey eyes almost glowing in my pipbuck light. "Was it a normal dream? Or did he break his word like I figured he would? Ah don't trust'im." She frowned. "He lied; I can still hear her singing."

"Maybe he can't control it." The little filly scrunched up her face at that but let me talk. "His powers might be out of his control. Or getting there. Me and Flare... we kept seeing visions. From the past. No way he did it on purpose. And... I dreamed I was here."

"Whaddya mean? Ya are here. That ain't nothin' special." She giggled. "Not makin' any sense anymore."

"I mean. I was here, but in the past." She sat down as a little smile found itself on her muzzle. "I met a pony in some cells in the labs, and he was a bit crazy. But, he gave me his name, and his story. Simple Heart."

"Ain't that whatcha called the crazy-voice pony?"

"Exactly... and he didn't know how I knew. So maybe, he's been alive so long his powers are getting out of control." I closed my eyes and sighed. "It's only a guess. But... if the orb could do similar things without a brain, maybe he's not as in control as he wants us to think."

Something warm snuggled up against my body. With a smile I put a leg over Serenity as she said, "Dunno why Flare calls you dumb." She nuzzled my leg. "Sometimes you're dense, but you're awesome when'ya try real hard." With my eyes closed, I slowly stroked my filly's mane. It was very greasy, but this wasn't the best place to suggest a bath.

"No, I'm not..." I sighed. "After Karkhoof. And everything else... I *am* dumb. You are too for accepting me."

"I'm still upset about that..." Serenity's voice broke and she had to take a second to compose herself. "But... we all messed up. It sucked, but you're not a bad pony. Just have something'ta make up for." She sniffled. "What matters is that yer my momma, and you love me. Everything else can be worked out later..."

"Sometimes you're too mature." I brushed her mane with my hoof. "Not usually though." She said. "I do love you though. I hate it when you get hurt, and I couldn't imagine living without you anymore. You're a little bit of purity in a world of suck, and I would fight the whole wasteland and all their guns if it meant keeping you safe."

"You're a sap." I rolled my eyes. "You look sick, too..."

"Something like that." With Serenity curled up beside me, my body was bubbling with so much motherly

love I barely noticed the symptoms... at least, I wish that was true. Truth be told, she did nothing to make me feel better, and each second it felt like I was slipping further and further into the abyss. "I'll be fine. How's the engine?"

With a grumble she crawled out from under me and over to the engine, poking at it. "Stupidly annoying, and stupid. At this rate, we could'a walked the distance."

"But that'd be boring." I opened my eyes and struggled into a sitting position. "Right?" She smiled and nodded. "And it's good practice. And we need rest. And I'm lazy and don't want to walk."

"You ain't lazy when ponies need'ta be beat up." Usually I beat up ponies when my life was at stake, and generally speaking that was not an environment conducive to laziness. "But I guess that's important," she continued. There was a frown on her muzzle and she gave the engine a small kick.

It was upsetting to see Serenity annoyed like that. I know how much she wanted to help us, and how frustrating it must have been not able to do it when she got the chance. My mind started going through ways I could help to cheer her up, and it got stuck on one particular. Back in her dream, the pony posing as her 'mother' was singing a song. While I was not a good singer by any measure, I just couldn't get the thought out of my head.

So, against my better judgement, I opened my mouth and started to sing what I could remember.

It's a big world, baby. And you're little, for a little while."

My voice was raspy, and hoarse, but I was trying.

It's a big world, baby. And you can fiddle, in your own style."

The last note hung in the air and reverberated through the darkness. For the life of me I couldn't remember the rest of the words to the song. I hoped it was enough though... Serenity seemed to have stopped in her place. Slowly she turned around to face me, tears welling in her eyes. She opened her mouth, and looked like she was about to speak for a second. Instead she turned back around to hammer harder at the engine.

I guess the song didn't work. Must have been my voice, it was too rough to hold a note.

"Silver, you shouldn't torture cats." Flare said groggily. Turning my head to him, I could see he was slowly getting to his feet... I didn't really understand what he said about cats though. I liked cats, and would never hurt one. It must have been part of his dream. "Any progress?"

"Almost," Serenity said in a hushed tone. "Almost."

"Good! Earth ponies and unicorns are so slow." He beat his wings once. "If I was alone I'd be out of here like that." He gave the floor a sharp stomp. "But I'll wait for you slowpokes."

"How's your back?" I asked from my heap on the floor. For some reason saying the words made me taste bile in the back of my throat.

"Crispy, and in constant agony. I've had worse though. Did I ever tell you about the time I was flayed?" Wait, what? I shook my head. "Well, it was when I was barely older than Serenity here. Okay, I was about five years older and had just got my first position. My patrol was hit by raiders and I got hit in the wing and crashed landed... in a raider den." Serenity gasped. "You're telling me! Luckily these weren't the Smooth-Tongue-style super raiders, just your regular dumb ones. They couldn't even get me out of my armour, never mind shoot through it. They really wanted me out though. After a lot of trial and error, they managed to tug off a piece of leg armour." He tapped his right foreleg with his left.

"What happened!" Serenity blurted out, no longer paying attention to her work.

The pegasus bit his lip and grimaced a bit. "The predictable. They took a long sharp knife," he made a knife sound, which was surprising as knives don't usually make sounds. "And started peeling away at the skin so I could see the muscle underneath." Serenity icked and looked away as if it would stop her from hearing. "It was... so painful The raider was taunting me too, even though I couldn't hear the words through the pain. I could see though, and as soon as he got too close..." The scorpion tail of his enclave armour snapped out and pierced the side of the tram. "Through the eye."

"That's so gross." Serenity whacked something in the engine.

"Hey, that's the truth for you. So don't worry about this wound, okay?" Flare smiled as he got to his hooves. "How long before we're ready to go, Chief?"

Serenity smacked the engine one more time. There was a small humming emanating from the machine before it turned into a full blown whirring as the whole platform started shaking making Serenity give a sharp yelp of surprise. Carefully she looked around to make sure no one heard her before announcing proudly, "Got it working! Just like I knew I could!"

"Good job, Serenity." She beamed all the more proudly as she hit a button and the tram started its slow steady pace.

"And that's how you can integrate a pipbuck's spell matrices into a cybernetic eye, see it was simple that they did." I stared at Serenity as her words went in one of my ears and spewed out the second without taking a stop between them. She may have been trying to teach me something important, but it just wasn't sticking. No matter how hard I tried.

My head bobbed up and down as I feigned understanding. "Uh, yeah. Totally. The magical energy... stuff." Our eyes met for a second and I thought she was about to call me out for not understanding. Instead she just giggled and turned to look out the tram window. Thank Celestia.

I hadn't really moved since the tram had started, and I was okay with that. My body wasn't getting better very quickly, and nausea seemed to be a permanent part of whatever I was experiencing. The only time I really moved was to scratch one of the constant itches. Mostly my hind legs. I knew my companions were worried about me, it was sort of obvious by their faces, but they were kind enough not to ask. Just let me stew in my self-created weakness. Maybe Flare was right about the Med-X.

No part of me wanted to admit it because of what that would mean, but I couldn't I deny it any longer. My

only saving grace was that if I was addicted, it would be a new addiction so the symptoms of withdrawal wouldn't be as bad, and it'd be easier to break. Of course, that's only if I knew anything about drugs, which I didn't. And of course being shot at by, like, a thousand deadly robots with laser guns. That couldn't have helped anything at all. At least it seemed like those things weren't active down here.

Cue the world fucking with me in three, two, one.

"Did You Really Think Hiding In The Tunnels Would Save You From My Sight! I See All! I Hear All!" The voice on the intercom said. At first, I had thought the intercom voice was the pony making the weird things happened, but after what happened upstairs I was less sure.

"Oh!" Serenity perked up a bit. "Can I ask a question then?" She didn't wait for an answer. "How come upstairs is all bright'n'shiny, but here has no power?" As usual, my daughter asked the best questions. If in a slightly strange and rude way.

"W-what! You Cannot Ask Questions Of Me!" The voice paused. "I Will Answer So You Are Less Ignorant In Death Than In Life. The Megaspell Generator Powering This Facility Has Nearly Run Out Of Energy! As Per Protocol, Energy Has Been Directed To Critical Areas." That made sense for the part of the facility used for housing rebuilding supplies, and the labs around Simple Heart... but what about the cameras, speakers, and all the areas near the entrance? Unless the voice lit those areas to lull adventures deeper into the heart of the facility... Did I just have a smart thought?

"Wait." Flare, who had been remarkably quiet up till then, looks up and asked. "Why would you use weapons to power-"

"FOOL!" So said the electronic voice. "Megaspells Are Not just Weapons. The First Was A Healing Spell! Any Spell Can Be Amplified!" Like a time spell. Which begged the question: why did Flare ask that? He clearly knew that megaspells didn't have to be weapons.

Flare started laughing, and confirmed my suspicions. He was up to something. "I know." There was that grin on his muzzle. "Do you know how many ponies know what the first megaspell was? Wasteland ponies I mean, because they teach history above the clouds, and even my remnants have enough information to know that. Regular ponies don't though..." oh, I understood. "So. You're either an uncannily smart wastelander from a stable, and I don't believe that for a second, a pegasus, a ghoul, or something that's not a pony."

"What Is The Meaning Of This?"

Flare completely ignored it. "So I'm going to chalk off no for a wastelander who can manipulate the facility's controls without the password, and chalk off pegasus for the same reason and because I know for a fact no pegasus alive, except me, has been in deep enough to find controls." He paced as he ranted. "Now you can't be a ghoul from here because of Mr. Crazy thoughts. Now, you could be a ghoul from stable whatever that had the password, but the password was designed to be deleted when life signs vanish, so you'd have lost access." He stomped a hoof. "So what the actual fuck are you?"

"I... I Don't Have To Subject Myself To These Questions!"

"Oh! Can I guess?" Serenity seemed to think it was a game. Or was just messing with the voice, I couldn't

tell which. "A mechanical robot AI who wants to turn us into your minions? Right? Right?" I just shook my head at her. It could have been an AI, but I doubted very much it wanted to turn us into robots. Of course, if it did, I already had a head start.

"My guess is another megaspell gone awry, so it fights with the other magical pony for control." Flare said. I wasn't so convinced of that.

"No... Not A Megaspell... Enough! I Have Had Enough! You Will Die!"

"Thanks, Flare. You pissed off the voice. The robot-controlling voice." Flare shrugged at my words and just smirked. "I hate you, Flare." I didn't really hate Flare, but at that moment it was something close. Luckily for him, I was feeling too weak to actually do anything but lie around until I had to start walking again. With the way the tram was moving, it'd be a while. Unless the voice actually had plans to blow us up or something. Which would be par the course in this fucking place. Just to be safe, I lifted my head up and scanned around with my EFS.

I didn't have to look much, for as soon as I stared forward two blips appeared in my vision. They were red, of course. And we were heading right at them. So much for the tram actually getting us anywhere. Just when we got it working, the god of the facility decided we needed to fight more crazy robots.

"Shit." I growled stumbling to my hooves. "Serenity. Dead ahead." My legs shook under my weight. When did walking become so difficult. I stumbled forward as Serenity peered into the darkness.

"Don't see anything." Serenity mumbled. Flare nodded his agreement. Serenity got the engine working, but apparently not the headlights.

"Wait..." I squinted into the darkness trying to work my bleary eyes into seeing the threat. After a few seconds of nothing, my vision whooshed and half my vision took a green tinge that allowed my sight to pierce the darkness. As I thought, two robots stood in our way. My eye tagged them with a purple box and the name 'Protectitron mk 2'. "Hit the brakes." Serenity tilted her head at me. "Just do it."

"Right, right." Serenity hit the brakes and we started sliding to a stop. Luckily, we weren't going that fast or we would have ploughed right into them and they would have shot us the fuck up. "What was that all about?" Serenity looked up at me with a pout (my vision turned off the green, darkness-seeing thing when I turned back to Serenity). She really liked the tram after she got it working.

"There are-" My statement was cut off by a gasp as a bolt of green energy slammed into the windshield, melting it. "That!" When a few dozen more green bolts slammed through in rapid succession we all collectively decided to get the fuck out of there.

Unfortunately I was not in a running mood, so the others had to match my slowly shaky hobbling. The only reason we survived at all was because the tram blocked us mostly from view once we got off the back. Not that it left us with many options. The tunnel was long, and mostly devoid of any place to hide. We could run back the length of the tunnel, but at the speed I was hobbling, the machines would catch up all too quickly.

"Any ideas?" I gasped as the machines roared behind us, spitting out green death.

"We could die." Flare looked back. What was once darkness was now growing green from the constant barrage of magical bolts. "But I do so like living. Death is so terribly final." I would have smacked him a little, but I wasn't feeling up to it.

After pushing my sweat-soaked mane out of my eyes, I tried to turn my night light on again so I could look for a place to hide. You know, it would have been really helpful if House actually told me about that feature before. It seemed like he hid half of the shit my new cybernetics did. It was probably a test.

There was something in sight, thank Celestia: a small door off the side of the tunnel. It must have been a maintenance room or something like that. Regardless, I made a beeline for it, and my companions followed after me. If only because I didn't really give them a choice in the matter. If nothing else, the room would bottleneck the robots to one at a time, and that might be enough for us to kill them. Not likely, but it was the only chance I saw in our condition. Or, really, my condition.

"How did you see that?" Flare asked when we reached the door. I tried to answer but when I opened my mouth I taste bile. "I mean, fuck, can you see in the dark or something?" The answer was yes, but I made no move to speak. My stomach was heaving uncomfortably, and I did not want to take chances.

When I tried to open the door though it locked. So much for Flare's lesson about not all doors being locked. Thankfully there was a terminal beside it. It gave me the usual password spiel, and a few clicks of my pipbuck made the door click, giving us access. I tore open the door with all the strength I could muster and looked around the room.

It was much bigger than had I expected it to be. The room was oddly shaped with a small hallway leading to a large room that stretched out perpendicularly. It had a mattress thrown in the corner beside a counter with a sack on it. The room was fairly cluttered with boxes, and other junk getting in my way. What caught my eye most was the trash can near the mattress and counter. I ran over there as fast as I could and puked my guts out into it. That did not make me feel much better so I collapsed onto the stained mattress and tried to stop my head from spinning.

It didn't really work well, so I closed my eyes. My ears painted the picture for me. I heard Flare shouting something. Sounds of plasma fire washed over me, and the sound of a door clicking closed blocked them out partly. Hoofsteps came towards me, one tripping over a box, spilling its contents. They voiced words of concern but I could barely hear them over the pounding in my head. I just need it to go away, then I could help. It'd be so simple.

"Hired..." I heard the voice that time. It was mostly masculine, but soft to the ear. Flare's voice. "Hired, are you okay?" There was nothing I could do in response. My body felt weaker than it ever had, and I wasn't even sure why. No... at that point I knew why, even if I didn't want to admit it. Denial would not save me this time.

"Momma, c'mon. Get up." That was a softer, younger voice that was prone to squeaking when stressed. Something poked into my ribs, and I grunted a response. I would be fine, I just needed to rest for a little. Between the burns and the withdrawal, I wasn't up for fighting robots right now. It didn't seem like I had a choice though. They were coming. I could hear their guns moving close. The door wouldn't hold.

"Hired..."

"Go without me."

"I would, but they're kind of blocking the door, and we need our meat shield." There was a soft smack and I heard Flare chuckle. "Ow, that hurts Serenity. But, really, we need you. You can't give up here, not now. Not after what we've been through." I wasn't giving up... Okay, maybe I was giving up a little. But at this point I was just slowing them down, Flare could grab Serenity, zip past, and escape without me. Serenity was all that mattered anyway. She was all that ever mattered.

"Take her, fly-"

"We'll be shot down, we need you, you big stupid oaf. Now get your ass up!"

"Momma is not a mule," Serenity said indignantly. "C'mon. We can take'em. I have my gun, you can grab Momma's Spark Pulse Emitter."

"Yeah... I'll do that, go wait in the hallway, yell and come back if they try to break in." I heard the filly diligently run off to her duty. "Hired, oh Hired, you should have listened." There was a shuffling sounds and something dropped to the ground beside my bed. "You're lucky we stumbled on what looks to be a smuggling hideout." I felt a sharp pain jab into my shoulder.

There was sweet relief at last. It washed over me like a splash of cool water in a desert. I let out a contented sigh as the drug worked its way into my system. It didn't alleviate all my ills though, but it was something. If not enough. My whole body seemed to ache for more, just one more.

"Stay here, but don't dawdle." I felt clumsy hooves fiddle with my collar pockets. "Once that starts working, we'll need you. Here." He floated something down and attached it to my pipbuck. "An audio-log, or something. Once that's over, you should be ready. I'm a fair fighter, but I'm no Hired Gun, so we need you. Don't let your new daughter down." There was a shuffling of hooves and boxes as the pounding in my head subsided. The recording Flare gave me started up.

Hey Baptisia, here's the recording you wanted. A voice spoke from my pipbuck. So you know it's us, or whatever. The stuff you wanted was easier to procure, the receipt is on the counter. The count is twenty vials of Med-X, thirteen counts of Rage, five Hydras, and one container of Buck. Thanks for the easy job, by the way. You have no idea how hard certain gems are to find, not to mention Flux. IMP was by far the worst. There was a chuckling sound.

I opened my eyes to see the bag of drugs lying on the ground in front of me. Any one of those things could have helped me. The Med-X Flare gave me just wasn't enough, not after everything that happened. My body was still so sore, and I felt weak.

I would ask what you need these for but... I get the feeling you won't answer. I've heard rumours of shit going down, and I hope you're safe. If not, I hope you get this message. You know, we've never met one-on-one, but it feels like I've known you all my life. You're a good pony, and this business venture has been profitable. So stay safe.

A vial of Med-X jutted out of the bag, so close. Reaching forward, I wrapped my mouth around it and stabbed myself with it. The sharp pain was mixed with sweet relief. It was good, it was enough. The sounds of gunfire filled my ears, drowning out the recording.

...want starmetal. Sorry I couldn't get it, that shit is rare and kept hidden. If I had more time... but it looks like we're out of time anyway. If it means anything, I thought you did good.

Something else fell out of the bag when I took the Med-X. It looked like a three syringes tapped together with a needle sticking out of the middle one. Rage. It was called Rage. I'd heard about it before. It made you stronger, faster, better at fighting. Just what I needed.

So... goodbye, you strange bitch I never met. May Celestia watch over you. Heh. Never expected to be a religious smuggler, but the way things are going, even crotchety old stallions need something to believe in.

The Rage was in my mouth. Part of me kept asking what I'd do if I got addicted to another drug, but there was another voice drowning it out. One that told me I needed to *survive*. And this drug would help me. One of those Mk 2's nearly killed us, and without this we couldn't handle two. So if that was the choice, I didn't have one.

The needle pierced my skin, and I felt heat rush through my body. My heart started pumping faster, and my ears burned as the drug took hold. My whole body twitched. I felt. Strong. And angry. I hated that facility. With all my being I wanted to tear it down with my teeth. I wanted to kill the ponies responsible for it, I wanted their blood. I needed blood.

I stood up. The mattress below my hooves was uncomfortable, and had springs sticking out of it. It pissed me off so I stomped hard. My hoof cut through the mattress as the rest of my body lifted off it. With a swing of my leg the mattress flew across the room into a shelf with a crash. Fucking mattress.

There was a shout of surprise from outside. The voice, my filly's. Those things were hurting my daughter. Oh, they needed to die. My hooves carried me out of the room faster than I thought was possible. I was unstoppable. My whole body felt like it was made of flames: deadly, fast, and full of fury. The thought of tearing those machines to bits just made me giddy.

In the tunnel I saw a blue and black blur zip down the tunnel, and my filly was nowhere to be seen. However, I could see the robots. That's all I needed to see. Those robot bastards and their magical energy weapons. My whole body convulsed as my mind pictured what they'd look like exploding. Their guns started spinning, but the sound of my laughter drowned them out. Oh, yes, let's do this.

They fired, and I ran.

It felt like I was running on wings, and their blasts couldn't touch me as I moved towards them. I didn't go straight for them, instead I was just off to the side of the leftmost, running along the wall of the tunnel so they had to turn to aim for me. They were too slow, and they wasted their ammunition on the wall just behind me. There was nothing they could do, not to me, not by then.

At the last second I pushed off the wall and propelled myself into the air. My path took me above the closest robot's guns. They tried to aim upwards, but they weren't fast enough. The full weight of my massive body crashed into one. And, like whenever I crashed into anything, I won.

My forelegs wrapped around one of the Protectiron's magical miniguns. With my metal leg hooked I pulled

as hard as I could. It struggled with me for a moment before my strength overcame it and the massive weapon tore off at the socket in a shower of sparks and wiring. Balanced on my hind legs, I swung the weapon at the machine. Machine and weapon cracked and broke; the weapon snapped in half, the machine caved in muttering about errors.

Its remaining weapon didn't stop firing though, and the other machine was already starting to spray at me. It gave me an idea. Grabbing the machine in my hooves I turned it around so it was between me and the other machine. In a flurry of magical energy, the two machines blasted at each other until both were melted. Unfortunately for me, when the robot I was standing behind stopped, the other was still going, though with only one gun still working.

"Fuck you!" I kicked my robot into the other. "Just die!"

I charged towards the remaining blip on my EFS. Its blasts licked at me, but only one made a direct hit. I was too fast, still too fast. My hooves fell like thunder on its hide, each strike tearing at it more and more. There were showers of sparks, blasts of green, and me. It was so easy, how could I not laugh. Fuck this facility, I was back.

When they found me I was laughing madly in the midst of the carnage I created. And why not laugh? It was funny. Without the drugs, I was forced to run and hide like a coward as a filly and pegasus fought my battles. With them, I tore robots apart with my bare hooves with nary a scratch. So maybe I was addicted, but who cared? If I could tear apart the robots that had been plaguing us since we entered without so much as breaking a sweat, then the drugs were a good thing. Yeah, I needed them, but when I got them I was unstoppable. That was funny. That was the joke, don't you get it?

Flare carried Serenity back, apparently at the sound of my laughter. When I saw she had taken a bolt to the chest Serenity had to pull me off Flare. He was supposed to protect her. Not let her get shot by weak-ass robots. If he couldn't do his job, then he should just die. Fuck his failure ass. Just... everything was just pissing me off.

"What the fuck, Silver!" Flare said in a shower of spittle when he got his voice back. "What the actual fu-" he stared at me and face hoofed. "No, seriously? What did you put in your system you fucking idiot?"

"Fuck off." I wasn't going to listen to that. Not from him. So I stormed off. He followed, though.

"Was it the Buck? The Rage?" He flew in front of me. "Hired listen to me, this is not a joke. This is a road you don't want to go down, okay? The drugs won't give you what you need. They promise great things, but all they do is take and take and take until you have nothing left. Do you really want to be that pony like me lying in a gutter, begging ponies for your next fix? I've been there, and it hurts.... Are you even listening?" Despite the roaring in my ears telling me to stomp him into putty I was listening. "I know what it's like. Thinking you can't live without them. As if they made you better, but they don't. They make you weak."

"What do you know? You gave up Dash. At the first opportunity." I stormed back into the Tram. Serenity followed but was silent. I hoped she didn't understand it.

"Fucking moron, you think that was it? You think I didn't stress over it, get tempted when shit went overboard?" I stopped and stared at him. "Three times I had the chance to use again, but stopped. Just

because you don't see it, doesn't mean it didn't happen."

"What? When?" I started pacing a little bit. My whole body felt the need to move. Keep moving.

"The night right after detox for a start. You were still out, and I was alone. It would have been easy to find some... but I didn't. I can't tell you why, but I held off taking." He looked. Upset, not mad, but disappointed maybe? "The second time was in the tunnels. You went catatonic, and those things took Serenity. I like her too you know, I hated the thought of harm coming to her. So I ran off after her. Well... you know how that turned out. I got sidetracked by ghouls, and desperate. As if Dash was teasing me, I found one on a desk. If you hadn't of shown up just then I might have..."

For some reason his voice calmed the rage in my belly. "The third time?"

"When we got back to Dise after Karkhoof." I hated that name. With every fibre of my being I despised it. Just hearing it made the rage boil up again, nearly spilling out. "I knew you were going to talk to me... figure out what I did. To you. You were pissed, and I knew it. So I panicked. I begged Starscream for Dash when you weren't looking and the bastard gave me one. I felt like I needed its strength... in the end I let it go. Maybe I should have, but I needed to face you myself. We both fucked up, and I was determined to face it myself. No matter the result. I needed to face my actions more than I needed Dash.

"Silver, you've fucked up. You've fucked up here, you fucked up in Karkhoof, in Timber, and in Bridle Hope, and Celestia knows where else. And yes, you need to face your fuck ups, just like I need to face mine. But not like this, not with those. You can be a great pony, despite your mistakes, but you need to let go of the things holding you back. With that shit in your system you'll only be a failure, and you'll fail again and again until all you know is the gutter."

I drew my eyes away from Flare; I couldn't stand to look at him. My eyes fell on Serenity, but I couldn't bear to see her either. With a frustrated sigh I sat on a bench and stared at the ground. The rage that filled me was fading.

My mind traced over Flare's words again and again. Maybe he was right, but I wasn't sure. With the drugs, I was able to come from the bottom to save the day, and without them I was just a useless sack of shit. How could I not use them when the difference was that much? On the other hoof, he spoke from experience. I had time to change, it'd be easier for me than it had any right to be.

Then there was facing my past. Looking back at my mistakes and accepting them. If only it was just Karkhoof, if only it was just Timber and Bridle. How could I look back at Wildfire and Foundation and accept that? How was I supposed to get past the totality of my failure? Just thinking about it brought tears to my eyes, if I could bear to do even that. The Med-X helped with that, it dulled the pain, but it was never enough. Not really.

The tram started moving again. Everything was silent. Just me and my thoughts, and I had a lot to think about.

We found the factory maybe an hour later, and the Rage had already wore off. I really hoped it wasn't addictive.

The entrance to the factory was a long staircase off the platform the tram stopped at. As we walked silently up the stairs I remembered I left an entire bag of Med-X back in the tunnels. That was... just lovely. And doing a wonder to improve my mood. Really. With my usual heavy sigh I just kept walking.

"You okay, Momma?"

"Yeah..." I sighed. "Just tired."

"You slept on the tram."

"Not enough." The stairs went on for what felt like forever. "Not nearly enough."

"Oh..." The little filly frowned. "Sorry. We'll be out soon, an' we can get back'ta Dise and rest. I'm sure Haze will wanna see you. She likes you a lot, ya know." Yeah, I knew that. After everything that had happened, I wasn't so sure she'd want to see me though. Not with my face looking like something out of a horror novel, and my mind fucked up beyond recognition. As Flare would put it: I had a cargo bay full of baggage, and half of it was explosive. It wouldn't have been so bad if the world wasn't always trying to set me on fire....

"I blame Curly Fries," Flare said from beside me.

For a minute I was thinking about arguing that again, but instead I just shrugged. "Dammit, Curly Fries!" I said way too loud. It was cathartic.

"Dammit, Curly Fries!" Serenity agreed before giggling.

"So." Flare said as we reached the apex of the stairs where double doors awaited us. "We can agree that whatever horror is waiting us inside is Curly Fries' fault." We all nodded our approval. He seemed like the perfect stallion to blame. "Oh, and I made sure to get some medicine from that room." Huh, wait, did he mean... "Ten doses at two a day should be enough to get you back to Dise... unless we get detoured, or, you know, explode."

"I don't like exploding." The Med-X wouldn't be so bad though.... I was still... conflicted over what I was going to do, but it was good to know he was trying to help me. At least in his usual Flare-like way.

"Exploding is bad for ya health." Serenity nodded. She would know, of course, because she used to be with The Watchers. "If you explode, I'd blame Curly Fries." With a small chuckle, I patted her on the head. With any luck she'd go on a years-long quest for vengeance. Hopefully, it'd keep her out of places like this.

I kicked open the doors. My strength had returned, well, not completely, as the vomiting had taken a lot out of me, as did the whole getting shot a lot thing. It was more than enough to kick open a few doors though... and apparently it was enough to kick said doors off their hinges. It wasn't my intention, but they crashed to the ground none the less.

"Show off," Flare muttered and walked into the dark factory floor.

According to our map, it was some sort of weapons manufacturing area, for the war, no doubt. I had to step inside to get a good look, as the area was devoid of power. Even with my pipbuck light, it was still so dark that my eye whirled in place and made everything go green and clear again.

It was... huge. The factory floor seemed to stretch into infinity. Conveyer belts on floor level were matched by large, incomprehensible (to me anyway) machines across the ceiling and above the ground. For reasons I'd never understand, numerous catwalks seemed to be strewn above the factory floor. Because that was safe.

Most distressing of all was the number of skeletons. They seemed to line up across the production floor in rows. Some were hanging from the catwalks, or half caught in long defunct machinery. The number was simply boggling. I'm not sure if knowing that they all died asleep made it any easier to bear.

"It's... impressive."

"You can see shit, Hired?" Flare squinted into the darkness. "I can't see much but vague shapes and outlines. Wait, that eye of yours? Are you a superhero now? Seeing in the dark? Maybe Batmare was right to have you as a sidekick, that's a pretty cool power." If the Batmare got caught in a situation like this she'd just teleport back to Dise. Sure, seeing in the dark was cool, but it wasn't really as impressive as all that.

"Yeah."

"Makes sense, with the higher tech forms of cybernetics tha systems are designed to unlock over periods of time so as not'ta overwhelm a new user with all these features one by one. By staggering releases it allows the user better control faster." Serenity sure was smart.

"How long until I unlock laser beams?"

"You're not allowed to have a laser beam." Flare said.

"And they don't exist for eyes." Serenity paused. "Yet." So there was still hope. Excellent. Of course the last thing the wasteland needed was me with the ability to fry people by glaring at them... because if I killed everyone I gave a dirty look to, the wasteland would be filled with corpses and pretty mares.

We continued on across the graveyard, finding more bones with every step. It was disheartening that Serenity no longer looked upset at the sight of skeletons: after all we had seen it made sense, but that didn't mean I really had to like it. Taken one at a time, the corpses didn't bother me much, but the sheer scale of those who had died here threw me off. I was glad that Serenity didn't have my augmented sight. No filly needed to see that.

It was quiet in this part of the facility, and that did nothing for my nerves. It wasn't like the tunnels that had echoed with every hoofstep. Every sound we made here was instantly eaten by the facility, never to be re-heard. Every creak was a sudden sharp sound that disappeared so fast I wasn't sure if I had imagined it or not. Every word quick and sudden. Then there was nothing. I almost missed the humming lights of the laboratory, because the silence was too much. But it was awkward to break; it didn't even want to be broken. As we travelled further in even Flare's jokes became nonexistent. Sacrificed to the silence.

It gave me time with my thoughts, and if you know me you know that me and my thoughts were at constant war. So instead I watched the production line. This part of the facility seemed to be making assault rifles fit for battle saddles or mouth work. They didn't seem to be that well-designed, but they were mass produced so I couldn't really expect much. What was good to know though was that the further we walked down the line, the more complete the rifles got. At the end, there should be a good stock of 'new' rifles... if nothing else we'd pack up as much as we could and sell them.

Which gave me an idea... this facility wasn't deep in the mountain, it was just that the entrance was hidden. If I got enough caps, I could set up an operation to restore the weapons here and I'd have enough guns for my own personal army. Or sell the position or... oh.

"I've know how to stop them." I stopped suddenly as I scanned the factory. Serenity and Flare both looked at me so I continued. "The Steel Rangers. It's simple. Serenity, you have the train map, right?" With a glow of her horn she unrolled the map. "How many exits are there?"

"Er, five, it looks like. Why? We're almost out."

"Where are they located?"

The little filly scrunched up her muzzle before pressing it to the map. "One's here, another is with the Steel Rangers. One's at the 'Medical Research Bay' another at the 'Limb And Organ Fabrication Plant' so cybernetics ah think. The last is at the 'Training Facility.'"

"So? What's the grand plan Hired. The shit in here is dangerous, if you go too far-"

"For us, maybe. We were reckless, and weak. The Steel Rangers are strong. If Simple Heart is growing weaker... then he won't stop them. The robots won't either. Slowly, but surely, they'll strip this place." They'd take everything of worth and use it against the wasteland. "So we make others get to it first."

"How? Wait, what?" Flare seemed confused.

"Tell House where the cybernetics entrance is. For example."

"Oh!" Serenity grinned. "And the Watchers where the medical wing is." I nodded at her, she got the idea.

"Tell the various factions only one entrance. They all get pre-war tech. It cancels out the Steel Rangers monopoly. Gives these factions equal footing." Then I'd tell the remaining factions that the Steel Rangers were there getting valuable tech. Some might try and thin them out... "Not the best option. But the only one."

"Well, who're you going to give the information to? A lot of those folk want your head, just, you know, for your information." Flare chuckled. "Guess you could tell your brother, you know, after you wipe the floor with him." I just shook my head. There was no way the Crimson Hoof was getting involved in this plan. Not ever.

So that was the plan. It was half formed at best, but it was the only real option I could think of. It'd give the other factions the same technology as the Steel Rangers to combat whatever they tried to do

"Do You Really Think I'd Let You Leave With Your Lives? Fools!" The voice made a triumphant return. "Where Exactly Do You Think Needed The Most Security? Here! You Shall Die Tonight!" Was it actually night? I wasn't so sure on that matter. We had been in here so long my sense of time was getting all screwy.

A flash of green came from somewhere in the facility. I looked around but they were too far away for my EFS. "Running sounds like a good idea," Flare said. I gave a curt nod and helped Serenity onto my back before taking off in a bolt.

My eye was able to give shape to the vague things that plagued us. Some of them in the distance were shaped like regular Protectitrons, other Mk 2's. In both cases, waves of green came flying at us from all directions. Thankfully the crowded factory floor caught most of the blasts before they got close. Just had to keep running.

The dark corridor was alight with green. The blasts flew and reflected off the machinery, creating almost beautiful light shows of death to help us run by. In front of us, I could see we were closing in towards the end of this particular assembly line. Rows of never-been-used guns sat there illuminated in jade. If we could grab those we could fight back, we could survive. And maybe make a few caps on the way.

"Here!" I yelled through a few skeletons to a stop. The sounds of their rattling bones was mixed with the blasts of green. "Guns. Grab as many as you can. Place won't be a total waste."

A blast of green energy singed Flare's mane.

"Is this really the time to scavenge?!"

"All the more guns to kill High Stakes with." I answered. That seemed to please Flare as he started shoving rifles into his saddle bags until they didn't fit anymore. I did the same. Serenity tried, but her bags were small, and they didn't fit, she did however float one into her magic so she was wielding both rifle and pistol while propping herself with her forelegs on my head. Flare flapped into the air beside me armed to the teeth, and I took the last rifle off the production line and aimed.

Click.

It was then I remembered you don't build guns fully loaded.

We started running again.

Just... come back... don't leave me.

What the fuck?! Why was Wildfire talking to me now; it wasn't the time for that. And Simple Heart said... he said... he might have lied. Shit. More blasts fired past. Serenity returned fire, but her pistol wasn't designed for armour, and the robots were all armour.

"Heeee's back." Flare said with a bitter laugh. Just then the 'god' of the facility decided to grace us with his voice.

This one heard the intruding ponies' plans. This one does not approve. This one will not let you escape!

Apparitions flooded my vision in rapid succession, but I kept running. Post Haste ran past, and I could smell the smoke and burning flesh. Foundation looked up at me, her eyes red with tears and I could taste blood in my mouth. Wildfire lay draped across the floor, blood pooling around her head wound, and her final words rang at me, clear as a bell. Even so, I kept running. The visions came and went, and I did my best to ignore them.

I'm not sure my companions were fairing as well. Flare was flying erratically, and Serenity kept aiming her gun at things that weren't there. Of course, how did we know the Protectitrons firing at us where there either? Maybe this whole thing was a mirage, a mistake, a dream. Did we ever wake up at all, were we really going to escape? Maybe this had just been an elaborate illusion to trap us in a dream world. Part of me contested that I knew he didn't have the power to create dreams specifically... except I only know that because he told me...

Fuck. I kept running. Dream or not, I was getting out.

I could only hope I was running towards the exit. It was hard to tell, but I had to hope. It was the only way to go though, so I kept running.

You can't run from this forever...

Like hell I couldn't!

If I'd had Rage, I'd have been able to run faster though, maybe I would have escaped with just another shot. But that didn't matter, because I didn't have it. All I had were my legs, weak from no food, little sleep and withdrawal. They had to do.

A green bolt blasted into my metal leg, causing sparks to fly. I closed my eyes from it for just a second, but that was enough for memories to start dancing vividly in my head. Not the memories I wanted either. I tore my eyes away as I couldn't before and kept running.

"We can make it!" I yelled. "Keep going. Whatever you're seeing." Foundation laughed gently in my ear. "It's not real. We made it this far. Just a little further. Just..."

I stopped.

My mind blanked. I could hear the bolts of energy wizz past. I could see flashes of green. I could smell burning flesh. None of that mattered. Because I found the exit. I knew what it was. It was the way out. Except for the length of rope dangling in front of it.

And Foundation hanging from the rope.

I couldn't see her like that, but I couldn't look away. I felt my heart shatter again, I felt my soul break at the sight. How could I leave her like that? I had to cut her down. Save her. *Dead*. I couldn't save the dead. The memories ran through my head, as fresh as day it happened. No pony should have to remember the way their daughter's corpse smelled.

Sobs wracked my body. My eyes blurred with tears. Why run? Why escape? What did it matter? I couldn't

protect Foundation, I couldn't protect anypony. All I could do was mourn them. Lay down and cry. Beg for forgiveness that would never come. I muttered apologies, but it wasn't enough. It could never be enough. I didn't deserve to escape. This place would be my grave.

Survive. A pony in my head whispered.

I ignored it, same as when I had ignored it on the cliff overlooking Marefort. It had been a long fall, or so I was told. I never could remember. Somehow I had survived. Luck, or Celestia's favour. I cursed both of them. Why should a mother outlast her daughter?

I could hear Flare and Serenity yelling at me, but their voices didn't register. I was too lost in the memory. The sadness was too overbearing. Nothing else seemed to matter but my tears... and Foundation swaying in the wind.

There's no wind inside.

Huh... against my better judgement I forced myself to look. Foundation was swaying. Inside... because she wasn't there. It was an illusion. I knew that... but what did it matter. She was still dead. My failure. I didn't deserve to live after that. After my daughter.

You have a new daughter who needs you.

Who needed me? What was I? A bundle of failures wrapped around too many muscles and a penchant for violence. I had never done a thing right in my life, and only dragged her to horrible places.

You are not your past. You must face who you were.

How...

Survive.

It wasn't Wildfire's voice I heard. Nor was it some quasi-magical apparition. It was my own voice. The part of me that was still fighting. Still trying to do good. Still trying to live. So I listened to myself and got up. The tears still flowed from my eyes, but it was a start.

I took a step forward. Foundation still hung there. It still tore at my heart. But I had to keep walking. To survive. So I wouldn't repeat my mistakes.

"Momma, are you okay?" Serenity said, her voice thick with panic.

"Yes." I sounded oddly calm. "I'm sorry. Let's get out of here."

I opened the door, and there was the bright light of the sun. We left through the door, and didn't look back. We had done it. We had escaped. We were free.

Level Up!

Skill Note: Survival 50

((A/N: I'm sorry for the delay; there were... complications. But here's the chapter, brought to you by me, No One, Kkat who created the story, and my editors: theBSDude, Julep, and Menti. Give these ponies your thanks if you see them.))

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