

Chapter 4: Misconceptions
“There are no zombie ponies.”

Pain!

I thought I had experienced pain after the Cloudsdale megaspell backwash and my sky wagon crash. I was wrong. I had never been shot before, and I had not expected it to hurt as much as it had. Figures that the first time it happens would be with the biggest rifle I had yet seen. I imagine the inequine wail of pain I made could be heard from Manehattan to Canterlot. It was cut short by May grabbing me jarringly to force a healing potion down my throat.

We only had a mouthful of healing potions, but May reached into her packs and pulled out another one. She didn't bother trying to reactivate her radiation ward, more concerned about the gaping hole in my leg. Before she could administer it though, she stopped short, looking at the hole punched by the powerful shot. It was being knit together by the magic of the potion abnormally quickly. As well, there seemed to be a faint green glow coming from the wound.

Despite the apparent rapidity of the wound's regeneration, May still made me drink the additional healing potion. I had no objections, although the pain had subsided before I finished drinking the second potion. I was glad for it though; I did not envy anypony who got shot through the leg without one available, especially if they were going to get shot at more.

“What the hell are they doing?” I panted. I tried to stand, but my shot leg was wobbly and gave out under me. Taking a glance at it, I saw that the flesh around the wound was stained darkly with my blood. At least I still bled like a normal pony.

“I don't know,” answered May, looking more than a little aggravated. “We walk up to the tower nice and peaceful, and their first response is to shoot at us?!”

“I'm just glad I spotted them,” I muttered, again trying and failing to stand. “That shot was probably lined up with one of our heads.”

“Considering mine was glowing, it probably made for a better target.” May had still not reactivated her radiation ward, presumably not wanting the light to lead the sniper to us.

As odd as it seemed, the lack of radiation ward seemed to have no real effect on us. Although the radiation detector in May's Pipbuck was practically screaming at us, I felt no different. Perhaps being irradiated before had granted us some kind of resilience. I wasn't complaining yet, but I also didn't want to be proven fatally wrong.

“Now what do we do?” I asked hurriedly. Whatever it was we were going to do, I wanted to do it before the intense radiation here made our condition any worse, if that were possible.

“Well,” pondered May, “they're not shooting at us any more, so it's possible we just spooked them. That being the case, we should try talking to them. I didn't come all this way to get turned away by superstitious snipers.”

“How do you plan on talking to them though?” I asked. I might have been able to fly up to the balcony for a chat, but wouldn't get close if they took another shot.

Before I could mention as much to May, her horn lit up as she cleared her throat. She then belted out a call to the ponies on the balcony in a magically amplified voice. **“Ministry of Arcane Science Security Ponies! This is Mayflower Cure, Ministry of Peace Spell Researcher and Medic, requesting that you hold your fire! Authorization Sparkle-Alpha-Dash, Two-Two-Seven.”**

My ears were ringing for a few moments after May's outburst. I wouldn't be surprised if everypony in the tower had heard that. It was somewhat reminiscent of Princess Luna's Royal Canterlot Voice, as demonstrated on Nightmare Night more than twenty years prior. I smiled, remembering the night fondly. However, this was not the time or place for nostalgia.

There was a long pause, with both May and I holding our breath. “Come out where we can see you!” The voice came from the tower. It was loud enough to hear at this range, but quite unlike May's magically amplified shout. “Slowly!”

I gave May a weak smile. I was glad that she had managed to say something convincing, but I still didn't like the circumstances we were under. Even if we approached cautiously, the ponies on the balcony still had a powerful rifle, and there was really nothing preventing them from taking another shot. They had completely ignored the 'reasonable caution' part of Turntable's report, even if we did look like zombies.

May seemed to share my concerns, but she was determined to get into the tower. Before moving out from behind the tipped over cart, May's horn lit up again. We were again enveloped in a hemispherical barrier, this one the sickly green colour of a shield instead of the rosy radiation ward. It also served to keep some of the radiation away from us, but not much.

Slowly, May and I walked out from behind the cart. My gait was still hobbled by the shot to my leg, so I leaned into May for support. I could have used my wings to take the weight off of it, but I imagined the sudden flapping might spook the ponies on the balcony into sudden shooting.

As we moved into view of the balcony, I forced both of my eyes to focus on the two ponies up there. They kept the rifle trained on us, but were thankfully not shooting. Yet. We continued until we were standing on top of the fallen brass letters.

May turned her gaze up towards the HAZ-MAT ponies, dropping the shield around us to once again magically project her voice. **“Ponies of the Ministry of Arcane Science! We come bearing news and aid! We seek an audience with Turntable and a chance to rest.”**

The two ponies looked at each other, presumably talking to each other about May's declarations. Then, the one not pointing the rifle at us levitated a megaphone in front of the mouthpiece of his radiation suit. “You can go right on back where you came from. We're not about to let a pair of zombies in here. Now get lost before my buddy gets shooty again.”

“I am afraid that you have some serious misconceptions about my friend and I,” insisted May, her magically amplified voice dwarfing the simple megaphone. **“We are *not* zombies. The affliction we**

suffer from is a result of intense magical radiation exposure. We are not contagious, and we are not going to eat your brains. The very notion is ridiculous.”

“Mutants, zombies, ghouls, revenants, I don't care what you call yourself,” declared the pony with the megaphone. “You're not getting in here. We have enough problems as it is without a pair of monstrosities mucking about the place.”

“We are not monsters either,” roared May, her tone losing its former civility. **“We have come here to help!”**

The balcony pony snickered derisively. “You want to help? That's rich.” The megaphone wielder exchanged glances with the sniper, then turned back to us. “Fine then, here's how you can help us. We got plenty of water in here thanks to a couple talismans, but our food and medicine reserves are nearly depleted. You bring us some food and medicine, then maybe we'll talk.”

Without waiting for a further response, the pony wielding the rifle took a warning shot at us. It impacted the ground a few inches from us, throwing a puff of ash into the air. May and I both gagged on the ash, making the roughness in our throats even worse. We trotted away from the tower before the sniper got the idea to take another, more accurate shot.

“Can you believe them?” fumed May. The two of us had put the MAS tower behind us half an hour ago, and she was still angry about their treatment. “We're the first living ponies they've seen from outside the tower, and they won't even listen to us.”

While I had not been expecting the warmest reception at the tower (the fact that I got shot notwithstanding), that they would turn us away entirely was insulting. I would have been satisfied to just give them our news regarding Canterlot and leave, but they hadn't even let us do that. As well, the task they set for us was a fool's errand; any food in the city would have been vaporized as readily as any living creatures.

However; “Actually, yes,” I said, answering May's question. She stopped and looked at me quizzically. I pointed to my lazy eye, which rolled down as if on cue. “I'm no stranger to being judged by my appearance.”

“This is totally different,” protested May. “The megaspell holocaust was nine days ago. This is no time for that kind of discrimination. If they didn't have a rifle pointed at us, I'd have pulled them down from that balcony for a stern lecture.”

I shook my head. “Ponies like that are always the same. It doesn't matter what's going on around them, they'll always find a way to make themselves feel better compared to others. Fluttershy taught me that the only way to deal with ponies like that is to not listen to them.”

May suddenly stopped trotting and fell to her haunches. She turned and looked at me like she'd seen a ghost. “You... knew Fluttershy?”

I stopped as well, looking back to May. Was it really so shocking? “Yes,” I replied, not sure how else to respond. “I've actually met all of the Ministry Mares, back when they lived in Ponyville.” I had never really given it too much thought; before the war, they all had pretty normal lives.

May still managed to look amazed. “I ran into Fluttershy a few times, but she was always too busy or timid to converse with. I also remember seeing her when she was on her modelling tour; long before this awful war even started.”

“I remember that,” I remarked. “That was around the time when Sparkle~Cola first hit the market. I bet it wouldn't have done half as well without her face slapped on it.”

May chuckled (that's a first), then smiled at me. “Can you tell me anything else about Fluttershy? Or any of them for that matter.”

I pressed a hoof to my chin. “I don't really have much to tell, at least not on a personal level. I was never really in their close circle, I just delivered the mail. The time I mentioned with Fluttershy was actually a bit of a fluke. Apparently she had been looking for opportunities to practice being assertive, and tried to tell off a couple of bullies making fun of my eye. It didn't work that well, so we just left them and had a brief chat.”

May let out a snorting laugh at that; “Fluttershy? Assertive? That's just like saying Twilight Sparkle was tardy with something.”

I smirked at May knowingly. I then proceeded to tell her about the 'Ms. Smartypants' incident, wherein I had ended up grappling with the former Mayor of Ponyville over an enchanted rag doll because Twilight Sparkle was late in sending a friendship report to Princess Celestia. By the time I was finished, May was rolling on the ash strewn street in laughter. The laughter was tainted with that same hoarse tinge, but it was still a nicer sound than any I'd heard since the megaspells went off. I couldn't help but join in.

“Oh Celestia's mercy,” cried May, wiping a tear away from her eye. She had finally stopped laughing after a good five minutes. “I don't suppose you've got more stories like that?”

“A few,” I replied. However, there was something more pressing I wanted to address before I told any more tales of Ponyville. “Before that though, what are we going to do about the MAS hub?”

“We're going to help them of course,” replied May curtly. “Regardless of their poor attitude, those two said that they were low on food and medicine. Right now the MASEBS is one of the most important things left standing in Equestria, and if they all starve to death, everypony who's left loses.”

“Okay, I can appreciate that, but that still leaves the problem of where we're going to get food and medicine.” I knew I was stating the obvious, but I hoped that doing so would prompt May to actually tell me what she had planned, as she often neglected to do.

“Manhattan General Hospital,” stated May solemnly. “It's the Manhattan hub for the Ministry of Peace. Before the blast, it was where I worked. I don't even know if it's still standing, but if it is, it's our best bet for medicine. If we're lucky, which we seem to be, there might be some food too.”

“Is there any chance there are survivors there?” It was a Ministry hub after all, just like the MAS building. Perhaps it had magical defences of its own.

May shook her head; “Doubt it; the hospital is a lot closer to the city centre. Even if we did have defences, they wouldn't have been nearly as effective.”

May and I took wandering through the ruins of Manehattan at a moderate pace. A large part of that was so May could get more stories of the Ministry Mares out of me. I didn't mind sharing, although it made me a bit sick to my stomach to recall the 'baked bads' incident. I still wanted a fresh, untainted muffin. May grimaced at that one as well, having apparently suffered from food poisoning once when she was younger.

In between my stories, May would switch the radio in her Pipbuck back on to see if Turntable had any more news. I personally wondered if he might have overheard May's magical shouting, and might have a different opinion of our attempts to help. This time when we tuned in, we were met with the tail end of a song by Sapphire Shores. It was an old favourite of mine, and again seemed strangely appropriate.

“That was Sapphire Shores' “The Sun Can't Hide Forever”. Apparently our cloud walking kin haven't gotten the message about that. Can't really blame them that much; it's an awful mess down here.”

I stopped, listening intently. I hadn't heard much about the other pegasus ponies after the megaspells went off. Raider had theorized about them waiting out the radiation behind the cloud ceiling, but I wondered if Turntable had found out something more specific. Unfortunately, he hadn't, and continued his broadcast.

“Speaking of sunshine though, I've got a ray of hope for anypony out there listening. A message came through earlier today from Stable-Tec! Despite the loss of the national communication network, this little engineer apparently rigged up a direct transmission terminal to terminal from out of the small town of Ponyville. The quality of the message degraded a bit in transit, but the message is clear.”

May and I glanced at each other hopefully. Gizmo had pulled through. Turntable played the recorded message, although it sounded like Gizmo was trying to speak over radio static at maximum volume.

Kzzzt- “Okay, I think it's working now. This is Stable-Tec Junior Engineer Gizmo. It took a while, but I managed to pull some data out of the Stable-Tec network. The Omega-Level Threat Protocols were transmitted successfully, and received by at least eighty-six percent of the finished Stables. As well, I can confirm that Stables One, Two, Eight, Twelve, Fifteen, Twenty-One, Twenty-Four, Twenty-Nine, Thirty-Two through Thirty-Seven, Sixty-Three, Seventy-Eight, Eighty-Nine through Ninety-One, Ninety-Nine and One-Oh-One have all been filled and sealed. I'll see if I can salvage any more data, but for now that's all I've got. Oh and if M-” -kzzt.

Gizmo's voice died away with a loud burst of static. Apparently he hadn't been able to maintain the transmission link. Still, the fact that he had managed to get through at all was a blessing. Even better, Stable Twenty-Nine had been on the list of successfully sealed Stables. May looked more relieved than

I'd seen her since... well, ever. Turntable picked up the broadcast again a moment later.

“Wish I could have heard that last bit before the link died, but this is the best news I've gotten since I took up this post. Not only did Stable-Tec get the word out, but we have confirmation that they managed to save quite a few ponies. If anypony out there have family slated for a spot in the listed Stables, take comfort in this news.”

“Better still, this info comes with a spot of my personal appreciation: Stable Twenty-Nine had a spot reserved for my Auntie Scratch. That's right fillies and gentlecolts, DJ P0N-3 lives! To that little Stable-Tec engineer, I give my deepest gratitude. It looks like there may be some hope out there for us after all. Thanks little guy, this next song goes out to you.”

The song that followed was one of the most upbeat songs in Turntable's selection, sung by Pinkie Pie herself. The song was about bringing smiles during troubled times, seeming more fitting now than any other time we had heard it in the past few days. Even though May and I were standing in the middle of the blast torn ruins of Manehattan, surrounded by the ash of countless dead ponies, everything seemed just a little bit better.

We were both disappointed when the song ended, but we pressed on towards Manehattan General Hospital. Gizmo had done his part, and now it was time to do ours. I hoped that we would be able to find what the ponies at the MAS hub needed, for the sake of Turntable and the others that had managed to survive there. Even those two jerk guards.

We continued walking towards the hospital as Turntable played a few more songs. I kinda hoped he'd eventually be able to expand his selection, although he wouldn't get the opportunity unless May and I found some supplies. It turned out to be rather fortunate that May and I could withstand the radiation exposure, otherwise they might have all starved to death. Although, even if we weren't strangely resilient, May still would have found a way to help them.

I was distracted from my musings by a soft glowing light that my lazy eye caught off to the side. Turning my good eye towards the light, I saw a Sparkle~Cola vending machine. Or, at least, most of a Sparkle~Cola machine. The front of the machine had been torn off by the megaspell blast, and the half of the machine facing the centre of the city had warped and melted. Despite that, two lines of soda bottles remained intact inside.

I wandered over to the machine, somewhat marvelled by the fact that it was still even mostly intact. I thought for a moment that the light I saw was the machine itself, but it was actually coming from the sodas. While one of the rows of bottles was regular, carrot flavoured cola, the other was the new Sparkle~Cola RAD flavour (It's like a buck to the face, with radishes!), which let off a soft rosy glow.

The crash of my old delivery wagon had cost me the opportunity to try the new beverage, and it sounded like it would be tasty. I plucked two bottles from the machine and turned back towards May. She smirked at me and levitated one of the bottles over to her (the glow of her magic almost perfectly matched the glow from the bottle's radiation). “Y'know the radiation in these things is obviously not healthy. Don't know where they got the idea to put it in from.”

“I don't really think we need to worry about that,” I nickered. Considering the circumstances, I imagined the regular Sparkle~Cola would have been just as irradiated as the RAD. As well, the radiation didn't seem to harm our mutated bodies any further than it already had.

I braced the top of the bottle in my teeth and used my tongue to flip the bottle cap off. I let out a small yelp as the small metal cap nicked my tongue, nearly causing me to drop the bottle. I set the bottle down and spat out the cap. Damn thing could have been used for shrapnel. May nickered at me and pointed to the machine. A bottle opener was attached to the intact side. I facehoofed.

Ignoring May's snickers, I picked up the bottle once again in my teeth. I tilted my head back to take a swig. I sputtered a little, having gulped a bit too much. Even so, it was really good. The soda was warm, although I had expected that, but the radish flavour was still strong. As well... whoa! It really was like a buck to the face. All of a sudden I felt rather invigorated, and more energetic than I had since we left Ponyville. I swiftly downed the rest of the soda, then looked over to May, who was nursing hers much more slowly.

“I'll admit,” she said between sips, “it's got quite a kick to it. I'm just not that fond of radishes.”

“I-” what I was about to say was cut off by a loud belch. Perhaps I shouldn't have drank the soda so quickly.

“How uncouth,” nickered May sarcastically.

I chuckled softly, a bit embarrassed. “I drank it too fast.” Duh.

“Indeed.” May's horn lit up as she floated a few of the bottles of regular Sparkle~Cola over to her. She handed the RAD off to me and opened a regular one for herself. She placed a couple more bottles into her saddlebags as well.

I polished off the soda that May had half finished before grabbing a few more from the machine and slipping them into my bags. Even though food and drink seemed to have less impact than they used to, I still planned to enjoy the little things when I could. I figured I would be riding the buzz from those sodas for a good while.

Just as May and I were about to get underway again, the air was split by an ear-rending shriek. Before I could figure out where it had come from, a streak of green and gold shot past us. May and I looked on in awe as a massive bird, regal and majestic, stopped in front of us. It stared down at the two of us, perhaps sizing us up. Licks of sickly green fire fell from its beak, and a massive aura of radiation at least ten times its own size surrounded it.

I was awestruck for a few moments before I realized how odd this was. Every living thing in the city, aside from those in the protection of the MAS tower, should have been incinerated. Had this bird flown in after the blast? Or did it somehow manage to magically survive? The latter, strange as it sounded, seemed to be suggested by the radiation bleeding off the creature.

“Well I'll be,” I heard May mutter from next to me. She tried to let out an impressed whistle, but her decayed lips made it impossible. “A phoenix.”

That was a phoenix?! I'd seen one once before when Princess Celestia brought her pet to a party in Ponyville. However, her phoenix had been a magnificent scarlet and gold (at least after she rejuvenated herself), not the sickly green and pale gold that this creature displayed. It also hadn't been radioactive enough to cause May's Pipbuck to emit a constant wail with no gap between clicks. Could it have been twisted by magical radiation like May and I had been?

May seemed to be fascinated by the mutant phoenix. She took a single step forward and began to speak to it. “Hello th-”

Before she could finish, the massive bird let out another ear-splitting screech and dove towards us, beak open and licked with flame. I shoved May out of its path, crashing into the Sparkle~Cola machine. As it passed over where we had been moments before, it spewed a wide stream of putrid green flame. It was the same colour as the small green fires that still burned around the city. The heat of the fire made me wince, but thankfully neither of us had been hit directly. The sickly phoenix swooped around after its pass, heading back towards us, shrieking angrily.

“Run!” I shouted, trying to get my own hooves to start moving. Thankfully, May didn't hesitate to take my advice.

We bolted away from the building just as the irradiated phoenix blasted fire at us again. The half demolished vending machine glowed bright green, before melting into a puddle of molten metal and glass. A hiss of steam came off the puddle as the remaining Sparkle~Cola evaporated. As well as being large and breathing fire, the bird was fast. It caught up to us quickly, and we had to take a sharp turn down a side street to avoid getting roasted.

“I don't understand,” shouted May as we ran down the new street. “Phoenixes aren't supposed to be this aggressive.”

“Maybe we stumbled into its territory,” I called back. I glanced over my shoulder, seeing that it was following us again after taking a loop around to follow the side street.

“Phoenixes aren't territorial either,” countered May. “Even if they were, we're miles from the Manehattan Gardens. They do tend to be loyal though.”

“Does that really matter right now?!”

As intriguing as this bird might have been to somepony like May, I was more immediately concerned about the fact that it was trying to barbeque us. I really hoped it hadn't mistaken us for carrion meat. We dove across the street as another wave of flame blasted closer to us than I would have liked. This time the rush of flame struck a few exposed steel beams on the corner of a building, the heat warping them. The entire corner of the building gave a metallic squeal as the girders bent, shifting the superstructure above them dangerously.

Despite the speed and power of the creature, it was providing us with a small opening. It slowed itself down when it breathed fire, usually just enough to allow May and I to get out of the way. Not always though, as the next pass made by the creature splashed flame onto my flank, eliciting a pained yelp from me. That same blast singed off most of the strands of hair that had been stubbornly clinging to May's tail.

Despite our ability to evade the bird (for the most part), we were still pretty screwed. I was glad for extra energy I had gotten from the Sparkle~Cola RAD, otherwise we'd have gotten torched by now, but we still had no way to defend ourselves against it. I imagine that Gizmo's gun, augmented though it was, wouldn't do a whole lot of damage to it. That was assuming the bullets didn't just melt from the heat and radiation it was giving off.

If May and I were going to get away from this alive, we would need to lose the phoenix. That was going to be damn near impossible with how fast it was. I briefly considered luring it away, but that was likely to result in me getting torched. As well, there would be nothing stopping it from coming back for May. Even if it worked, May would never let me hear the end of it if I managed to come back at all.

May had her own ideas. She magically removed That Gun from its holster, then dashed back into the street. She fired two shots in the direction of the fire-bird, but they either missed or had no real impact. The noise from the gun seemed to at least startle the creature, making it stop in midair briefly. Taking advantage of the opening, May and I dashed back up the street.

As we passed under the bird, May fired off three more shots. It fluttered back through the air, giving us a chance to pull ahead. Our lead didn't last long; as soon as it realized we weren't shooting anymore, it charged at us once again. May slipped the gun away, not having the time to reload as we ran. We just reached the corner of the main street when another blast of fire flared out behind us.

In a flash of desperate inspiration, I shoved May back onto the main street. The bird's wash of flame struck the already warped metal beams of the building we had passed before, which glowed brightly as they heated further. There was a horrific squeal of abused metal as the weakened beams buckled under the weight of the building they supported. As the building began to tip, the beams that had not been melted groaned and bent from the added pressure.

The building seemed to collapse a lot more slowly than I had anticipated. Rending metal, collapsing timbers, crumbling plaster and shattering glass blended into a cacophony of destruction. Much like the gunfire before, the awful noise spooked the mutant phoenix. It fluttered in confusion, backpedalling through the air away from the falling structure. I wanted to let up a whoop as it decided that getting crushed was not a risk it was willing to take on our account.

Sadly, my revelry was cut short as I realized that the building was going to crush May and I as surely as it would have the phoenix. We had little room to avoid the collapse in the narrow street, and the building was coming down faster and faster as more of the supports at the base were torn loose. Worse still, the building was twisting as it fell, almost as though it wanted to retaliate against me for bringing about its demise.

Before I could run any further, May grasped me magically and pulled me close to her. She glanced up at the collapsing building, shoving me over a few feet. She then threw up her magical shield around us,

her horn glowing brightly. A layer of overflow formed as the shield's thickness and brightness increased. May groaned with the strain of holding the shield as the building landed on us.

May had shoved us into the path of one of the building's windows, the scorched wooden frame of which splintered against her shield. A number of shards of glass shattered around its edges. A few chairs and desks fell from the floor of the building, crashing against our protection and breaking apart. A blown out terminal struck the shield, bouncing almost comically down the side. The rain of debris continued for several heart pounding seconds.

May maintained her barrier spell for a full minute, allowing any remaining debris from the building to fall to the ground. The building darkened a bit when she dropped the shield, its glow providing almost as much light as the weak sunlight that penetrated from the far side of the building (now facing skyward). May was panting roughly, but at least we had survived.

May turned on me, jabbing a hoof into my breast. "Don't you ever! Do that! Again!" She prodded her hoof into my chest with each word for emphasis.

I wasn't about to object.

Reluctantly, May allowed me to fly her up through the collapsed building in order to get free of it. It was a tricky flight with my wings in such poor shape, but I managed to pull it off. When we emerged, the sickly phoenix was nowhere to be seen. I was thankful, since it meant I wouldn't need to bring down any more buildings. May and I walked along the upturned side of the building until we reached the edge, jumping back down onto the street.

Now that it was no longer a threat, I found myself more curious about the irradiated phoenix that had attacked us. "Where do you think it came from?" I asked.

May seemed to be thinking about it as well, but she also had some prior knowledge. "The Manehattan Gardens," she answered with certainty. "A large number of exotic and rare creatures were housed there, including a few phoenixes."

"Wouldn't they have been killed by the megaspell?" Everything else had been.

"Yes, but remember that phoenixes have their own exceptional properties." I did remember that, as I had seen Celestia's pet burst into flames and then reform from the ashes. "Either by their own rebirth process or external sources, fire won't keep a phoenix down."

That made a certain amount of sense; balefire was still fire, sort of. "Okay, but what about the rest of it? Fire breathing, radiation fields and aggression are not in that same book of tricks."

May shrugged; she didn't seem to have any answers on that front. "My best guess is that the combination of balefire and magical radiation twisted the phoenix while it was still a pile of ash. Or it could have gotten its ashes mixed up with something else during the rebirth process. It might have been interesting to study if I'd had the chance."

I found myself feeling rather disappointed at May's statement. It was bad enough that the megaspells had killed so many ponies. Now their aftereffects were twisting up everything that was left standing. I was all the more glad about Gizmo's revelation that the Stables had been successfully sealed, even if he had yet to confirm all of them. At least somepony would be able to live their lives away from this horror.

In the meantime, it was up to those of us left on the surface to look out for each other, even if not everypony was willing to play nice. The rest of our trip through the city was mercifully uneventful, and we arrived at Manehattan General late in the afternoon. Unfortunately, there wasn't much left of it.

While the building appeared to have survived the blast intact, a skyscraper across the street had not been so fortunate. The tower had fallen directly on top of the MoP hub, crushing half the building underneath it. From there, the former hospital had collapsed in on itself from the fourth floor upwards, the upper levels pulverized by the wreckage of the fallen building. That left us with half of the lower three floors to scavenge for supplies; less than a fifth of the building.

Mercifully, the remnants of the building were sturdy enough to remain standing, and did not look to be in danger of further collapse. I had more than enough experience with demolition for the day. The main entrance to the hospital had collapsed, forcing May and I to enter the building through an adjacent window. Surprisingly, the pane of glass was still mostly intact, though covered with spiderweb cracks. May levitated a chunk of debris, using it to break the glass and let us through.

The interior of the hospital was surprisingly well preserved, from what I could see. However, the interior was dim, the lights having all burnt out, shattered or died from a lack of power. May's horn ignited with magical light, bringing the hospital's interior into focus. We let out a joint scream at what we saw.

The former Ministry of Peace hub was filled with corpses. Directly in front of us were two charred unicorn bodies in equally burnt pink and yellow uniform dresses. Only a few feet away, an earth pony patient sat dead in a half melted wheelchair. She was a gruesome sight, as her eyes had burst right out of their sockets. Apparently there had been defences around this building, although they had only served to make the death of the ponies inside more horrid.

For the first time in a while, the smell of death reached my nose. All through our travels I had grown used to the smell of my own rotten flesh, but the scent of so much of it contained in one place, much of it burnt, struck me hard. The scent of medicine and disinfectant mixed in didn't help. I turned on the spot, stuck my head out the now glassless window and vomited onto the ashen pavement. The Sparkle~Cola RAD was much worse coming up than it had been going down.

May managed to stay a little more composed than I did. Which just meant that she was able to hold off vomiting herself until I was finished. When she was through, she returned to the two dead nurses in front of us. She pecked at their dresses with a hoof, turning over their name tags. One of them was too scorched to read, but the other had 'Buttercup' printed on it. May slumped onto her haunches. Somepony she knew, I presumed.

"It's kind of funny," May said, a few tears escaping from her eyes. "The day before the blast, I was

scheduled for the overnight shift. I asked Buttercup to cover for me because I was having migraines, and I was going to take her shift the following morning. I had been on my way into the city when the megaspell went off.”

I marvelled at that. It seemed that, like me, her reason for being on the edge of a megaspell blast was as much a fluke as my own had been. Much like the pegasus behind me that had burned to death, somepony had been killed in May's place. Was it coincidence? Or had we been specifically selected for the curse of bearing witness to the destruction of Equestria?

“Should we bury her?” I asked, sensing that this friend had been a close one.

May stood back up and shook her head; “Let's go, we've got ponies that are still alive to consider. If we stopped to see to everypony that was already dead, we'd be at it forever.”

I nodded, but my heart went out to May. At least the ponies elsewhere in the city had been cremated, and not just left to rot where they fell. “Where should we start?”

“As luck would have it,” said May, deliberately looking away from Buttercup's corpse, “my office and lab are on the third floor. I kept a few supplies in there, and my master key should be there too. Once we have that, we'll be able to open every medical box left in the building, assuming any of them are locked. Once we've got the meds, we can see if there's anything edible left in the cafeteria. Each floor has a safe as well, although those were mainly used to keep hard copies of patient records.”

May knew the building's layout, so I allowed her to lead the way. We walked around the outermost hall of the ground floor, taking care not to disturb any of the dead ponies. Some of them were burnt worse than others, with a hoofful having burned down to their skeletons. We reached the stairwell, which was thankfully intact. Next to it was an elevator that had clearly been in transit when the building was destroyed. The doors had been slammed open by the impact of the carriage, which lay crumpled just below the frame. The snapped cable lay coiled on top of the heap.

“Gizmo still probably could have fixed it,” nickered May. I gave a weak smile.

The stairs were sturdy enough to hold both of us, although raining debris from above had punched a few holes in the staircase. When we reached the third floor, we discovered that the stairs above had collapsed entirely, blocking any further ascent. Part of the floor above had come with them, and we had to squeeze under it to get through to the hallway. More rubble blocked one branch of the hall, but May proceeded down the other path. Although the ceiling groaned, the debris had settled enough that we could avoid further collapse so long as we didn't start bucking the walls down.

At the end of the hall (or at least, the middle of the hall before the other half of the building had been crushed), was May's office. The door lay splayed off its hinges, and the window was shattered. May nudged it aside, causing it to fall right out of the frame. She shrugged and proceeded inside. It was furnished with a desk, several cabinets, a pink and yellow metal box marked with a butterfly and a small lab setup in one corner.

May glanced at the small chemistry set contemplatively. "I suppose a quick look couldn't hurt."

Without stopping to explain, May walked over to the lab table. She magically pulled a microscope towards her, as well as a pair of tweezers and some glass plates. Using the tweezers, she plucked a piece of her rotten skin from one of her forelegs. She placed it carefully between the glass plates, then slipped it beneath the lens of the microscope.

I watched silently as she twiddled the knobs on the microscope for a few minutes, occasionally murmuring 'I see' and 'hmm'. She looked up from the microscope and let out a sigh, turning back to face me. "Nothing I hadn't really guessed already," she claimed. I could only assume she was talking about our condition. "Obviously a mutation caused by the extreme radiation exposure, but I'd need better equipment to delve into it further."

"Maybe the MAS ponies will be so happy we brought them supplies that they'll let you use theirs," I suggested a bit dubiously. May still gave a small smile in return.

She left the microscope where it was and moved over to her desk. She pulled open a few drawers, levitating their contents out and into her saddlebags. Two healing potions, a bottle of pills, three inhalers and a few syringes. She pulled out a key hanging on a chain, which she hung around her neck. Lastly, she pulled out a coin sack, shaking it gingerly. She looked like she was about to abandon it, but shrugged and slipped it into her bags as well.

"Do you plan on bribing the MAS ponies if all else fails?" I asked wryly.

"Not unless they take bottle caps," replied May with a bemused snort. "I collected them as a hobby in what little spare time I had. I figured it wouldn't hurt to hang on to them for a bit of sentiment."

I nodded, smiling slightly. May moved over to the medical box and opened it, pulling out four more healing potions, a couple packets of RadAway, and a few more syringes. We left her office and proceeded through each room left intact on the third floor, retrieving what we could from the medical boxes contained within them. We repeated the process for the patient rooms on the second floor. May stopped in each room for a moment to pull the blankets over the head of anypony who had died in their bed. If they had been asleep when the bomb went off, it would have been a small mercy.

By the time we returned to the ground floor, May's packs were loaded with plenty of medical supplies, including some braces, ointments, and a large quantity of magic laced bandages. That still left the problem of food. Thankfully, the cafeteria had also been spared by the collapse, and was largely free of corpses. This probably owed to the fact that the bomb had gone off after breakfast hours had finished. There were a number of fridges and pantries that, despite their charred exteriors, were ripe for the picking.

Before I could enter the cafeteria kitchen though, May held a hoof out in front of me. "There's something alive in here," she said, glancing at what appeared to be a large, walk-in cooler. She was staring at it rather intently, even though the door was shut tight.

“How can there be something alive?” I demanded, perhaps a bit louder than I should have considering there might be something hostile nearby.

“There might not be,” said May. She held her Pipbuck up to me. “This thing has a feature that can detect nearby lifeforms and determine if they're hostile or not. However, I'm not sure it's working properly.”

“Why's that?”

“It should have been able to pick up anything living from further away than this,” noted May. She let out an angry sigh; there was more. “Also, the health monitor on this thing hasn't been registering my vitals since a few days ago. It seems to think I'm deceased.”

That *was* strange. “Maybe the mutation is confusing it,” I suggested, though May probably already had a better idea of her own.

“Maybe,” said May, just going along with what I said for now.

Leaving the topic alone, she stepped cautiously towards the large cooler. From a few feet away she pulled the door open with her magic, allowing the light from her horn to cast inside. From where I was standing, I could see another corpse within the large fridge, apparently having been sealed inside when the megaspell detonated. It looked strangely rotten for a corpse that had been preserved in a cooler.

May and I jumped back a full yard when the corpse shifted, rising to its hooves slowly. It was a zombie pony! Wait, I checked myself, not a zombie. Somepony like May and I, mutated by the radiation but not killed by the exposure. Perhaps being in the fridge at the time of the blast had provided that little bit of extra protection. The not-a-zombie shambled towards us slowly, its gait stiffened by the lingering cold of the fridge.

May stepped forward, raising a hoof towards the other pony. “Are you alright?” She asked.

The pony did not respond, simply continuing to trot slowly towards us. It raised its- no, his head slightly, staring vacantly at the two of us. He stopped, looking back and forth between the two of us, his tongue slipping out of his muzzle. A low, unintelligible gurgling noise escaped from his throat. Despite being in the same physical condition as May and me, this pony seemed to be lacking in mental wellness. Had he perhaps suffered brain damage from the lack of fresh air?

Before we could explore the possibility of helping this poor buck, he let out an inequine growl before breaking into a charge towards us. He was still slowed by his stiff limbs, giving May and I a chance to duck out of the way easily. The mutated buck, unable to turn swiftly, collided headlong with a pantry just behind where we had been standing, breaking the doors off when he collided with it. He staggered backwards, bits of broken wood stabbing into his face.

The collision with the pantry did not seem to phase the zombie pony, as it turned back towards us, slaving mindlessly. May pulled That Gun out of its holster and pointed it at him. “Stay right where you are,” she ordered. “I don't want to have to use this.”

The zombie paid her no heed and charged at her again. May grimaced, and I heard a clicking sound coming from the gun. "Shit!" she called, rolling out of the way of the charging buck. She had never reloaded the weapon.

May's horn lit up, pulling open one of the pouches on the holster's bandolier and removing a cylinder of fresh bullets from it. The chamber of the gun sprung open, forcibly ejecting the empty casings from within. Before May could slip the new ammunition in, the zombie buck pounced on her, causing her magic to falter, dropping gun and bullets alike. She let out a high pitched scream of pain as he bit into her shoulder savagely. Dark blood oozed from the wound, mixing with foam from his mouth.

I had to act quickly or the zombie stallion would tear May's leg clean off. I ran up to him from behind, intending to pry him loose, but was met with a strong rear hoof kick. The force of the kick threw me against a nearby counter, knocking a cutting board and knife to the floor with a clatter. I rubbed the back of my head gingerly, already feeling a lump forming. I spat out a tooth that the kick had knocked loose.

A pained whinny from May jerked my attention back to the zombie trying to make a snack out of her. Acting instinctively, I grabbed the handle of the knife that had fallen to the floor in my teeth. Its blade was still fairly sharp. I jumped into the air, gliding above the reach of the buck's hind hooves. I dropped onto him from directly above, the impact wrenching his teeth free of May's shoulder. Without hesitating I drove the knife in my mouth straight into the top of his head. It penetrated his skull with sickening ease, and a squishy crunching noise signalled the end of zombie buck.

The buck screamed awfully and thrashed, bucking me off of its back. I landed roughly near the same counter, watching as the buck collapsed into a twitching heap, falling still after a few moments. What I had done barely registered as I flew over to May's side, propping her up against a nearby cabinet. The wound in her shoulder was ugly, and I quickly dove into her saddlebags for a healing potion. At least we weren't short on them this time.

May's shoulder began to knit itself back together as the healing potion took effect. The same faint green glow that had been around my gunshot wound could be seen, supplementing the potion's magic. May grunted as the potion finished its work, then gingerly got back upright. She winced as she moved her shoulder, pulling the hoof off the floor to keep her weight off of it. Her horn glowed and she rolled her shoulder, mending the sprain caused by the zombie's initial pounce.

Once she was finished tending to herself, May glanced at the now lifeless corpse of the buck that had tried to eat her. "Did you..." she began, stopping without looking for confirmation.

At her words, I too began to stare at the cadaver. I had killed somepony. A strange sensation washed over me. I had kept myself away from the war specifically because I didn't want to hurt anyone, but now I had done just that. Not even an enemy of Equestria, I had just killed a fellow pony! True, he was savage, voracious and probably deranged, but he had still been either a Ministry of Peace employee or a patient. I shuddered coldly, and had to seat myself to catch my breath. I hadn't realized that I had been panting so harshly.

May walked up to the buck, his dead eyes staring blankly at her. She magically removed the knife from his skull, then closed his eyelids. She bowed her head over him, then turned to face me. "Thank you,"

she said. I wasn't sure I wanted to be thanked for that. "I'm sure he was suffering, and there wasn't anything I could have done for him under the circumstances." That didn't make me feel too much better. "Now, let's see what we can find."

I was glad to move on to opening the cupboards, pantries and fridges, taking my mind away from the dead zombie buck. I didn't want to start thinking about who he had been or how he had gotten trapped in the fridge. I wanted to focus on what we had come here for, and the still living ponies who were counting on us.

The cafeteria yielded an excellent amount of canned, boxed and otherwise preserved food, enough to last the ponies in the MAS building a good while so long as they rationed it. Unfortunately, it was all tainted with magical radiation, and made May's Pipbuck click alarmingly. Over the week and a half since the megaspell detonation, the radiation had settled into the unprotected building, bleeding into the food. The contents of the cooler were slightly better, having been sealed away, but not by much.

Thankfully, it seemed that the Ministry of Peace had been prepared for such a possibility. May produced a talisman that she had found on the second floor, which she claimed could be used to purge small amounts of magical radiation. According to her, it contained the same spell that formed the basis of RadAway potions. Considering the amount of food we had gathered, we would only be able to purge the stockpile once.

This opened up several new problems. As soon as the purging spell was finished, the radiation would start to seep into the food again. With the radiation as concentrated as it was, it wouldn't take all that long. On top of that, transporting the food back to the Ministry of Arcane Science hub would be a daunting task. May's telekinesis was sufficient to lift about half of what we had gathered at a time, but would leave it unshielded against the radiation. Maintaining her radiation ward and telekinesis together would cut the mass she could carry to one quarter of what she could have before.

This effectively meant that we would have to make eight trips through the streets of Mnaehattan. Not only would that take a ridiculous amount of time, but there were still threats that could derail us further, such as that mutant, balefire breathing phoenix. Not only that, but the food we left behind on each trip would start absorbing radiation again. I wasn't sure I trusted the stability of the building either.

"Too bad we don't have a wagon," muttered May, staring at the food we had gathered.

I groaned, falling to my haunches. I winced as I sat on the part of my leg that had been shot. Wait... that was it! "I think we might have something that'll work." I reminded her about the overturned cart we had ducked behind when the guard ponies had shot at us.

"That could work," remarked May with a smile. "How do you plan on getting it here though?" I smirked coyly and fluttered my featherless wings at her. "Oh yeah."

Before heading back to pick up the cart, I helped May move the supplies out onto the street. I didn't

want them being lost if the building should choose to collapse while I was gone. We piled them neatly in the middle of the street, then I turned and took off. I flew up, relishing the chance to be back in the air. It helped that I knew the city much better from above, and would be able to get to the cart and back quickly.

As I passed over May, my lazy eye rolled downwards, catching a last glimpse of her. She was levitating something out of her saddlebags and bringing it to her mouth. It was hard to tell from this distance, but it looked like one of the inhalers she had taken from her office. She took a deep breath with the canister in her mouth. I presumed it was some sort of aerosol asthma medication. Did she think it would help with the roughness of our throats? Making a note to ask her about it when I got back, I flew off towards the MAS hub.

I managed to reach the tower after only ten minutes. Air was really the only way to travel, though I wished I could convince May of that. I circled around the building, avoiding the balcony where the guards had been, and set down beneath the monorail track on the far side. From there, I trotted over to the overturned cart. It took a bit of straining, but I managed to get it back upright.

I moved around to the front of the cart, intending to strap myself in. Unfortunately, the harness was in tatters, half of it burnt off. I wasn't about to let something like that stop me though. Using the straps of my own saddlebags and a bit of patchwork, I was able to fashion something that would hold together well enough to pull the cart. Hopefully it would also be able to take the added weight of May and the food; I didn't really have anything better at my disposal.

I pulled the cart along the ground to test the harness first. It was a bit tricky, as one of the wheels was missing, causing the axle to scrape the ground noisily. Still, the makeshift harness held up, and the missing wheel wouldn't be a problem in the air. Once I had passed back under the monorail, I took off, putting the tower behind me.

It took me a little longer to get back to the hospital with the cart dragging behind me, but I did so without incident. I landed in the street, coming to a stop in front of May, who was laying in the middle of the road next to the pile of food. She had a strange, spaced out look about her; her pupils were dilated and she wore an awkward smile. She barely seemed to notice I had returned.

“Lookie what I found,” I announced jovially.

May blinked, then shook her head, her attention focusing back on me. “Nice work,” she said, sounding a little weary. Her voice still sounded coarse, so apparently the inhaler hadn't helped, answering my question before I had to ask it.

I smiled at her, then nodded towards the pile of food. “Mind putting those onto the cart? I'd have to take this jury-rigged harness apart to get out right now.”

“Sure thing.”

May's horn lit up as she magically lifted the boxes and cans onto the cart a few stacks at a time. Once she had them all loaded, she climbed onto the cart herself, and produced the radiation purging talisman. I looked back and watched as the talisman lit up, prompted by May. The pile of food glowed with a soft

green light that seeped off of it and into the talisman. When the process was finished, the talisman sparked and died, causing May to sigh and toss it aside.

Immediately after discarding the talisman, May cast her magical radiation ward around the cart in its entirety. The clicking noise of her Pipbuck quieted as the radiation was repelled. Without further delay, I began to pull against the harness of the cart, not wanting to keep the ponies of the MAS hub waiting any longer. We were in the air less than a minute later, May's concentration on the ward thankfully keeping her from complaining.

We reached the MAS hub for the final time early in the evening. I deliberately hauled the cart out in front of the tower to show the two guards what we had brought for them, only to not see them. Instead, there was only one guard, and he looked to be a bit smaller than the two who had been there during the day. He aimed the rifle at us just as they had, but at least he didn't start shooting right away. From this close I could see his face clearly through the domed helmet of his HAZ-MAT suit. He looked confused.

“Hey there,” I called out to him. “Special delivery for the ponies of the MAS Manehattan hub.”

The young buck gawked at me. Apparently the preceding guards had not bothered to inform him that they had sent us to find food and medical supplies. I set the cart down by the main entrance, keeping both my eyes fixed on the guard just in case. I detached myself from the harness, then flew back up to the balcony. The younger guard seemed a bit startled when I landed next to him, but more than a little curious.

“You're one of those zombie ponies Turntable was talking about,” stated the colt bluntly.

I facehoofed. “We need a new title,” I muttered, not wanting to associate myself with the cannibalistic buck that I had actually labelled a zombie in my own mind. “That's not important right now though; we've got food and medicine for you here at the hub. The guards that were up here earlier said you were in need of them.”

The HAZ-MAT colt looked at me like I was crazy. “Um... I think they might have been just trying to get rid of you.” What. “This place was actually designed to be a failsafe megaspell shelter; we've got food enough to last a good long while.” Seeing the growing look of irritation on my face, he quickly added: “Not that your gift is unwelcome. In fact, we are in need of a fair amount of medicine. Even though we patched the holes in our magical defences, there's still a few ponies suffering from radiation poisoning. Not to mention those that were injured when parts of the tower were damaged. Plus, that food will make the rationing less arduous.”

I was only slightly relieved, and a bit miffed at the two jerk guards for sending us on a wild gryphon chase. “Well, I'm glad this wasn't a complete waste. Now then, my companion and I are in need of rest. We also have some news to give to Turntable about Canterlot, and a few other settlements.”

The guard grimaced. “I... don't think I can allow that.” He held up a foreleg equipped with a Pipbuck built into the suit, which went clickety-click as he waved it over me. “With the amount of radiation you're giving off, I'm surprised you're not glowing. Our decontamination facility isn't sufficient to clean

you up enough to safely enter the tower. If we let you in, everypony else here might be at risk.”

I felt like there was a vice around my heart. I did not regret gathering the supplies, but I ached inside from the idea that my presence might be a health hazard to other ponies. I looked sternly at the guard colt, although my eye wandered again, making it look a little comical. “Alright, but can I trust you to relay our information to Turntable? It's really important.”

The colt nodded; “Absolutely. It’s the least I can do.”

After relaying the information we had for Turntable to the young guard, I returned to May with instructions from him. I pulled the cart, which May was still keeping shielded from outside radiation, around to the rear of the building, where a loading dock was occupied by a slew of large, battered wagons. I shoved the cart into an empty bay, and was surprised to see the two guards from earlier coming out in their HAZ-MAT suits to take the food and medicine inside. They seemed just as surprised that we had delivered it in the first place.

May kept a small smattering of the medical supplies for our own use, just in case we had any more strange encounters on the way back to Ponyville. As well, I kept a bit of the food for us, but not much, considering that we seemed able to go longer without it. I hoped that we would be able to purge the excess radiation we had absorbed by the time we got back to Ponyville, otherwise we wouldn't be able to stay there.

May and I spent the night in an empty building across the street from the MAS hub. The ordeals of the day had left us fatigued, and made the sleep I got far more wonderful than it had been since the megaspells. I was relieved that my sleep came without nightmares for the first time in a week and a half. May was less fortunate, as memories of the mangled, corpse filled hospital had filled her night with terrors. I thought I heard her cry out Buttercup's name once or twice.

We awoke early the following morning and, following a small breakfast, proceeded to depart from Manehattan. We took the trip slowly, not wanting to over exert ourselves after the previous days events. Thankfully, the city seemed willing to let us go without incident. Better still, once we were outside the city limits, the radiation therein no longer saturating us, the radiation levels of our own bodies began to slowly bleed off.

As we passed through Fetlock, May smiled softly, knowing thanks to Gizmo that somewhere out there her brother and nephew were safe inside Stable Twenty-Nine. She switched on Turntable's broadcast, wanting to make sure our news had gotten through as well.

“Good morning everypony, I hope you all slept well. Now put on your listening ears, because I've got some more news for you. Remember how yesterday I was talking about those zombie ponies that had been spotted in the vicinity of Manehattan? Well it turns out that not only are they not crazed, diseased or undead, they're also quite generous.”

I winced, remembering the actual zombie pony from the hospital. Hopefully he was a unique case.

“A pair of these ponies braved the Manehattan ruins yesterday to gather food and medical supplies, which they graciously donated to those of us here at the MAS hub. Along with those supplies, they had some news from outside the city. Now, unfortunately things get a little heart-breaking here. Those two came all the way from Ponyville, where they got a glimpse of our former capital city of Canterlot. Sadly, a particularly nasty Zebra megaspell wiped out the city. There is a bit of hope though, as our little Stable-Tec engineer friend yesterday told us that Stable One, which is located in Canterlot, was among those successfully sealed. My prayers go out to the Princesses; for whom the Stable was primarily intended.”

“Since I don't want to leave you on a sour note, I've got one last piece of news, also thanks to those not-zombie-ponies. As I mentioned, they came here from Ponyville, which they claim is largely intact, and very empty due to most of its population being relocated to a nearby Stable. If you can make the trip and need some place to stay that's not glowing with radiation, it would be worth your while to head that way. As well, the small outlying settlement of Appleloosa has been confirmed as a relatively safe haven by some other sources. It seems that small towns are the place to be right now, and that's the truth of the matter.”

Footnote: Status Update!

Current Status: Ghoul, moderately irradiated

Lucidity: High

Bonus Perk Added: Like a Buck to the Face! (Rank 1) – You really like Sparkle~Cola RAD! As well, the trace amounts of radiation contained within are beneficial to your ghoulish physiology. In addition to the regular effects, the consumption of Sparkle~Cola RAD grants a temporary +1 to Agility.