

"War and Peace"

If you want peace, prepare for war

All of the **'Big Top Blok'** was under attack, the Muffincakes had bided their time for months, gathering up tools and material from which they would send in their assault. It was no secret, everyone had figured that this would eventually happen, what had not been expected was the ferocity and quick movements of the raiders. Organized into baker's dozens, the combatants screamed down each of the three pathways of shops, forcing their opponents to retreat further and further towards the grand plaza.

Any and all plans of a counter-attack put in place by the Misfits fell through when the PA system came under control of the invading force, threats of mutilation and torture to those that offered any resistance quickly pacified travelers who wanted no part in the firefights between the Misfits and the Baker Barbarian Clans. This hostile takeover was a pitched battle, where the outnumbered Misfits slowly lost ground and morale against overwhelming numbers and ferocity.

A few pockets of resistance remained, those that would not lay down arms for any reason, those that would not surrender. Gangrene knew that there would be no mercy granted to any of them if they surrendered, especially not to the foals under her care. She had narrowly gotten back to her home when the fighting broke out. Her home was a Colt & Filly Community Center, a double wide shop that included a small indoor gymnasium repurposed into a dorm for two dozen tiny beds flanked by a few larger ones. There was a HelpingHooves Clinic right next door that she frequented, helping out the aging doctor that worked there when she had time.

It was a shame she'd never be able to volunteer to help out ever again, or even accept that job she had been contemplating. The small clinic was now in flames, billowing smoking choke toward the razor wire netting above. Superheated bolts flew over-head, sinking into walls and shattering the few remaining wide paned windows at the front of the recreation center. Once upon a time she thought they let in cheerful light, now those wide windows just exposed the interior to the raging bolter fire coming from outside.

"Come on out!" Called a raider from outside, laughing in mocking tones. They had taken to being cocky after taking out several of the Vipers. Several of them had abandoned their cover to stand in the open, strutting closer to the shop. The earth stallion raider lifted his welding visor to get a better look into the building, moving closer. "Huh, are you all dead already?"

"Nope." Gangrene chimed, raising her rifle and popping up from under the window sill. She

cocked the level of her varmint rifle and lanced a shot straight between the buck's eyes. "I was just waiting for a clear shot."

A set of hooves pulled Gangrene down just in time, only one of the six steaming hot bolts struck her, bouncing off one of her armor's spiked pauldrons and sizzling across the floor.

"Don't stick your head out, stupid twit!" Warned the only remaining Viper alive other than Gangrene. When the yellow mare smiled at him, he snorted, "And don't smile at me like dat either, you almost got wasted!"

"Calm down, Bruise, we'll get out of this." Gangrene said with certainty, reloading her rifle. Sweat poured down her body. Shifting wind brought blazing heat from the burning clinic next door, trapping smoke under the ceiling and spoiling the air. She coughed, covering her mouth with a hoof.

"This is bad..." Bruise muttered. He tended to point out the obvious a lot, for as long as Gangrene knew him, he always had a thing for pointing at an obvious trap and saying, 'Lookat that dangerous trap. We should avoid it!' as if one of the Vipers would stupidly trample over it. It didn't help that the chocolate colored stallion was the last one to notice what was going on.

"Gee, yah think? I kinda figured it started going bad when they nailed Blister to the door with those Smelt-Bolters." The yellow mare sarcastically mumbled, raising her gun over the threshold of the window to blind fire a few times.

"It's j-just me and you, Gangrene. The rest're dead!" Bruise whimpered, his eyes trailing to the front door where the corpse of the mare he had been pining for had been bolted. "Maybe we should just surrender?" The scrawny buck was crying, wiping his face on his apron, his eyes clenched shut.

Bruise was by far the least capable of all the Vipers, which was why he had never been taken by Gangrene on any scav runs. No, Bruise was good with kids and cooking, so that's what they used him for--He was the one that kept the place running while the gang was out. Gangrene wasn't the least bit surprised to see him crack.

"The ones that were home are dead, moron. Not everypony was home." She retorted, disgust in her voice. "We ain't surrenderin'! They don't do mercy. Sure, they'll just kill us, but think about what they'll do to the kids we watch over!"

That was all Bruise needed to hear, his crying stemmed, he convulsed. He was surrounded by dead bodies, several of them enemies, the rest were his friends, peeled open with those wicked steel carving tools or nailed to things by bolts. One of the raiders had even used a repurposed drill press mounted to them like a lance to rape one of their friends in the face, leaving a corpse with a mutilated mush filled hole where a stern yet scarred face once was.

The children had it worse, having heard it from the small gymnasium right next door to the entrance. Gangrene had ordered them to play hide n' seek in the cramped storage room which now sang with the sobs and coughs of a dozen fillies and colts.

Rebel Riot was at his small workbench in the gymnasium, working feverishly on the *Bloomberg* assault rifle he had to get to Keena. No time to fiddle and screw around, taking all day like he usually did. The parts were laid out before him, his eyes darting from piece to piece as he studied their details, lips moving in silent words as he spoke to himself. A hot bolt sank into the wall just overhead, he yelped and ducked his head, his tiny mohawk singed, a dance of smoke trailing off the tip.

“Fuck! It’s hard to work without those candy asses screwing up my workspace!” He coughed, eyes watering from the smoke filling the air. With shaky hooves he began reassembly.

“How are you coming with that *Bloomberg*, Riot?!” Gangrene called loudly from the lobby, “I could really use some more fire power before we’re cooked alive in here!”

“Don’t rush me!” Rebel screamed back, pounding the table as he began to cry. “J-just shut the fuck up! You want this stupid thing to fire, don’t you?!”

“Aw, we just wanna pick up our kids from the daaaaaycaaaaare!” One of the raiders sang, “We just wanna teach em how to make cupcakes!” called a mare, cackling madly. “Our boss just loooves kids! So sweet and tasty. Come kids, don’t be too hasty!~” The raiders outside were having a blast, terrifying a set of mooks in a shop was great fun. What was most delicious was what reward they would get when they brought Muffincake some nice little snack cakes.

Hearing the calls from outside made the blood of those inside run cold, so cold that not even the hot, stale air blowing through the building could warm them.

“I need you to do something for me, Bruise.” Gangrene spoke grimly, giving the young buck a warm, sad smile. She reached out and pressed a hoof onto his shoulder. “Promise me you’ll do it?”

“I...You...” Bruise stammered, “You haven’t even told me what you wanted from me yet!” He was worried, was she going to ask him to charge headlong into the raiders to give her a chance to take out a few more? The mare had asked Curbstomp to do that a few times, but the hardy stallion had been a walking meat tank! He was just a scrawny thing!

“Take the kids and run.” Gangrene ordered. She pointed a hoof to the side of the building, “Use the back entrance, they might spot you but you’ll be out of range by then because they’ll be dealing with me.”

Bruise’s eyes widened, “I...I can’t leave you h-here.” He sputtered, coughing into his apron and wheezing, “They’ll kill you!”

“I know.” The mare said, her eye misting with tears, “Just promise me you’ll find Steelgraft, tell him to take you to Greenvale Heights. Find a better life for those kids and never let the wastes change you.” Gangrene was good with kids, but Bruise here, he was a model father. Gangrene never really told him how much she appreciated him looking after everyone, including the Vipers.

“Gangrene, I can’t!” Bruise cried out. “I can’t just leave you to di---” A hoof pressing to his lips silenced him, the mare leaned in, moving her lips to press a soft kiss to his lips. “W-wha--”

The kiss was brief and chaste, but left the stallion flushed and confused. Gangrene pushed one of his sweat matted hazel locks from his cheek and whispered into his ear, “Go, or I will shoot you myself.” When she pulled back, tears were rolling down her cheeks. “I’ll buy you some time.” She promised.

The stallion argued no further, turning tail at the threat of being shot to do what he had to do. He burst into the gymnasium, ducking down as several bolts clipped a cot nearby, setting it on fire. He threw open the storage room door and ushered the foals out, “Everypony out, come on, hide n’ seek’s over! We’re going to play tag now. Don’t let the bad ponies outside ‘tag’ you with their guns!”

It was a quick chore, making sure all the foals had what they needed. A little bit of food, their favorite toy, and Bruise made sure to get their favorite bedtime book as well. “Rebel, come on! We’re

going!” The fire that had started with one cot was now starting to spread, they had to leave now.

“Do what you gotta do, I’m doin what I gotta do!” The colt shot back, sweating over his work. “I need to get this gun to Keena! I promised!” This had been the first time Gangrene had asked him for help with a serious mission, he was not about to let her down. He loaded in the trigger mechanism he finished and screwed it into place. “I’ll be right behind you, just gimme a minute!” The foal muttered under his breath unkind words about the terrified fudge colored stallion.

By the time it came to leave, Rebel Riot had just put the final touches on the rifle, making it ready for action. “There!” Rebel announced, holding the complete rifle up over his head. Now it could operated by creatures with hands! The mod kit was rather crude, but Rebel had done the best he could filling in the gaps in the design with some inspired jury-rigging between a discarded toaster and a few paper clips.

“We done?” Bruise asked, dancing in place, eyes darting around at everything catching on fire.

“Yeah.” Rebel affirmed, strapping the assault rifle to his riotshield, “I just have to get this to Gangr--”

“No time, kiddo! She’ll catch up!” It hurt Bruise to consider that that may have been a lie.

With the looming threat of burning alive growing ever closer to reality, the foal unhappily agreed to leave with the others, making for the back door through the gymnasium. It was none too soon, the fire was rapidly spreading and now their home was going to be engulfed in flames.

Gangrene levitated her rifle over the window sill and propped it up with a crate, the barrel leaning out the window. She used her telekinesis to fire the weapon blindly, trying to give the appearance somepony was there while she laid on her belly and scooted to the desk near the entrance.

Smoke trailed up the walls, dancing over brightly colored pictures the kids had drawn. Fire licked at these tender memories, wiping them into curls of ash that became airborne. The posters for the Filly&Colt Club baked into the walls, the image of a pair of foals playing with Fluttershy, the Ministry Mare of Peace, bubbled sickly as the magic protection on it slowly failed. Every fond memory the yellow mare grew here were turning to ash around her. There was still hope--Hope that the seeds of kindness planted in the children under her care would grow into something beautiful.

‘Blam!’ ‘Blam!’ She made sure to space out her shots. She knew she was missing, every round was sailing wide. Any hit she landed was going to be a coincidence, but her plan was to misdirect and buy her time for what she needed to do.

Behind the desk she found the safe she needed, behind a torn portrait of the founder of the club, a mare named ‘Hope’ that had been blind. She laughed, finding the coincidence fitting. A mare named Blind Hope that wanted to make the world a better place by opening a club for foals in a bad part of Detroit during the war. What Gangrene knew of her was inspiring, she also ran a soup kitchen and worked for the Ministry of Peace.

What was in the safe behind the portrait was far more sinister, at least to Gangrene. A part of her life she thought she’d never see again. She had held onto it mostly to remind her where she had come from and how far she had come after that dark time. A hot bolt sank into the wall a few feet from her, so close that she could feel its heat over the heat of the growing fire. She had to hurry.

The safe opened and she laid eyes upon her armor, her old armor. The armor of a Steel Ranger, modified to fit her horn in a metal reservoir. “I never thought I’d see you again.” She snarled at the emotionless visor, “It’s fitting that you become my coffin.” The armor was donned with practiced ease, despite the years she had gone without wearing it. The magic suit of armor’s heat regulators made the fire hardly an issue, the gleaming visuals as the old suit powered up at a dull hum. The emblem on her left flank had been scratched off, which had been the only indication of her rank. She laughed, finding how it fit so well to be most unpleasant. It made her skin crawl.

‘Blam!’ ‘Blam!’ ‘Click’ ‘Click’ ‘Click’--Her varmint rifle had run dry. The raiders would soon realize that either she was out of ammo or that they had been tricked. Gangrene quickly popped the panel on her flank open and loaded a drug cocktail into the auto-medication matrix, Med-X, Buck, and Stampede. Stampede already had Med-X, a powerful and widely used pain killer in it, but a double dose would ensure all her nerve endings were ice cold numb, and the Buck would give her strength and endurance that would push her body’s limits to the razor’s edge of breaking. A pain killer, steroids, and an aggression amplifier in a noxious blend of cranial poison. The yellow mare had used such drugs recreationally, and knew just how much to use for any given situation. Coming down off this would make her mind foggy, the thick syrup alone could kill her.--She didn’t care about overdosing, she was likely going to die against the swarm of heavily armed raiders outside anyway. She disabled the suit’s regulator on how much drugs it would pump into her and primed the system so that it would keep her going for as long as possible. Perhaps there was a time where she would have cut and run, but that wasn’t her anymore. Steelgraft put his life on the line for total strangers, he was what every Steel Ranger was supposed to represent. *That naive idiot will probably get himself killed without me*, she thought. She hoped she was wrong, that he’d beat the odds.

The suit would buy her a few seconds against those improvised industrial weapons. Considering that those tools were used to cut and bolt steel together, there was little that would be good defense against that fierce offense. This also meant the Muffincakes never bothered much for their own defense, opting for mobility to get in close to set fires and kill their opposition quickly.

Gangrene had to arm herself--The downside to the weapons the Muffincakes used, they tended to destroy or warp anything their victim was using, reducing armor and guns to bent pieces of scrap or slag. The only things in the smoke filled, cramped lobby were burning sofas and bench seats, which would be useful if Steelgraft were here to hurl them, and a pair of '*Can Cleavers*', magical saber chain-saws named for their ability to cut Steel Ranger armor apart in a single swipe. The rest of the weapons were warped, some still attached to their previous owners, some of which were friends. This home was now to be a tomb for their ashes. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, all my memories are old and bust.* That would have made a good zebra rhyme, Gangrene would laugh if this wasn't so painful to see.

"Time to give them some medicine..." Gangrene muttered to herself, choosing those weapons and levitating them to her. She was unfamiliar, but she'd be soon acquainted with their use. She powered on the two '*Can Cleavers*' and moved to the window. A plucky, greasy faced raider mare leaning in spotted the power armor clad medic. For her curiosity Gangrene gifted the ugly crimson mare a splitting headache by carving her face open with the magical chainsaw.

"Oh, damn! Looks like we get seconds!" Laughed one of the raider, watching another of their number fall. Of the thirteen of their dozen, eight remained. "Crumbs! All crumbs!" The mad cackle of them was more like the made laugh of carnivorous hyenas, high in pitch and maddening. When Gangrene leapt heavily out of the window with a hard 'Whud' she received several whistles. "Canned meat! Canned meat! Cut her legs, make it ground beef!"

"Shut the fuck up you psycho pastry pansies!" Gangrene roared, all the drugs in her system drove her into a rage and she lowered her head to charge into the group, splitting one of the cretins down the center into two equal halves. The raiders scattered, flanking her and making themselves harder targets. Heavy hot bolts pelted Gangrene, making her stumble as her armor buckled inward from each hit, leaving a hot dent. The Med-X dulled any pain she felt, but the mare could smell her pelt bubbling and baking inside the armor already.

Her Eyes Forward Sparkle tracked the location of every target--She engaged her targeting system, which just came online and aimed for the raider charging her with a Drill-Lance, selecting his forelegs. His legs left his body with a hot sizzle, his body tipping forward, the drill sinking into the ground. The

rotation of the drill began to spin the raider around at a rapid rate, flinging him off his saddle harness to a unicorn raider wielding a Can Cleaver of her own. Without hesitation the raider cut her ally in twain as he sailed at her. “I like my stallions like I like my creamer! Half and Half!” The raider snickered madly.

“What’re you doing?!” Called one of the raiders to the left, a raider so mangle covered that his pelt’s original color could not be determined. “What did boss say about playing with your food?”

“He said to make it scream!” Roared a beefy grey stallion that charged Gangrene from the side, his enormous bulk sending the mare bouncing off the floor, leaving a crack in the stained tile.

She recovered quickly, the mare groaning as she came to her senses, a warning prompt on her heads up display warning her of an incoming attack. The floor where her head used to be sizzled, Gangrene narrowly avoiding a killing blow. Sparks danced in the air as two golden hued magical blades collided, spark driven matrix engines humming madly as the impact put strain upon them. Her opponent was more experienced with the Can Cleaver, and even though Gangrene was wielding two in her Telekinesis, this wickedly grinning, mule ugly unicorn was gaining ground on her.

“You must make out with your boss’s ass to be that ugly!” Gangrene mocked, her drug-addled rage blossoming through her mind. She had been in a few scraps in her day, but being in the center of a free-for-all was not what she was accustomed to. She promised herself she’d never do something this stupid or crazy again, no, she would leave that to Steelgraft. She laughed, imagining how he’d be flailing around the battlefield, somehow managing to be effective and deadly despite his reservations.

Against the backdrop of two raging infernos a duel to the death waged on, many on one, long shadows tangled in a hypnotic dance against the vacant stores. The crackle of the raging fire was the music with the screams, howls, and insults of the raiders as the chorus.

Eventually, something gave--A lucky shot from Magma Bolter cut into a joint on Gangrene’s armor, disabling one of Gangrene’s back legs. An incoming downward swing from her opponent’s Can Cleaver sunk into the brow of her helmet. Gangrene twisted her head away, the armor was scalded with burning heat--the impact of a super hot bolt caused half the armor on her face to shatter outwards. Driven by blind fury and rage, Gangrene gave one final swing of her Can Cleaver, the blade finding purchase on an unfortunate raider who may have survived had he been four inches shorter. The top half of the raider’s skull rolled across the ground, the twitchy eyed creep let out a half-roasted laugh as the remainder of his brain cooked and he fell over, giving a final twitch.

On her own she almost did it, she almost took out a baker's dozen worth of Muffincake's heavier hitters. It was quite the accomplishment, something she'd be able to brag about if she wasn't certainly about to die. The mare fell with a weak groan, her watering eyes taking in the sight of her blazing home. Her armor struggled to function, to keep her alive despite the extensive damage the suit had sustained. In the wasteland game of 'Rock, Paper, Dynamite' the Muffincakes countered Steel Ranger defense almost poetically with their hot, unforgiving weapons.

"Take a good long look." The vicious raider mare rumbled, sinking the blade of her Can Cleaver into the ground right next to Gangrene's exposed face. "Look at it..." She hissed, pushing a hoof down on the back of Gangrene's head, "We turned your home into a little oven. An oven full of screaming little buns."

Gangrene laughed, tears in her eyes from the growing pain filling her body. On her failing EFS she could see a whole group of little green blips moving away swiftly. "Hehehawhawhaw," she snorted, the laughter was infectious among the raiders that joined in for one reason or anything.

The mare stomped on Gangrene harshly, "What is there to laugh about, you stupid Viper? We killed you and all your little buns! Boss is going to be very happy!" She then stopped, considering something else entirely, "Are you happy for us?"

"Heh, no, it's just you're so stupid!" The broken mare exclaimed, "Nopony was home when it went up, you got four of us! B-but...The others...They're far away by now."

"You think you can make me look like an idiot?!" The ugly mare roared, raising her hoof to stomp on Gangrene several more times.

"Nah, you already look like an idiot." Gangrene slurred, defiant until the very end. She closed her eyes, ready to die. She wanted her last thoughts to be of the foals and of her closest friends. If only she believed in an afterlife, then maybe she'd be blissfully at peace in this moment.

The raider edged the Can Carver's blade through the floor and closer to Gangrene's face, so furious that spit oozed from between her rotten, jagged teeth. "Squirm you stupid bitch, because when I'm done with you, I'm going to fuck every one of your pint sized hump buddies with my lathe!" Her threat reached deaf ears. The blade rose slowly, like the blade of a guillotine, the shadows cast on the face of the unnamed raider was her executioner's mask.

‘Clank’-‘Clank’-‘Clank’-‘Clank’--The raiders had been caught unaware, for in the right place at just the right time the Steel Rangers appeared, as if summoned by the plight of a sister in arms. The whirl of a gatling-gun barrel gaining speed soon filled the air with the sharp cry of raining steel. It was rare when it happened, that the heavily armored Steel Rangers ever got the drop on a group of raiders, but when given the chance, the heavy firepower of a ranger would strip raider plights from the wasteland like weeds from a sickly garden.

Eight Steel Rangers stormed down the cobblestone street, blazing the air with gunfire, lead by Standtall Stillshot, the Crusader tasked with the security checkpoint on the highway nearby. The very checkpoint Gangrene and her friends wrecked when they fled. Why would they come here? Still pursuing Steelgraft for his tech, finding another way inside to do so? The explanation was far more simple than that.

The remaining raiders had little chance to mount a counterattack, the baker’s dozen was polished off under the heavy ordinance of minigun fire and a few grenades from another ranger’s battle saddle. Gangrene’s armor held up against the incoming shrapnel and bullets, but the lightly armored raiders fell to pieces, littering the floor with their broken bodies.

“Are you alright?” Standtall rumbled as he trampled over the still-twitching corpse of the raider that had nearly taken Gangrene’s life in order to reach her. “You did quite a number on these raiders alone. Where is your squad?”

Gangrene never thought she’d be happy to see a Steel Ranger, or maybe she just felt relief that she wasn’t about to die. “What the hell are you doing here?” She grumbled, weakly pushing herself up. Her armor rattled, the automatic repair and medical systems were already fixing her up. They were slow, but it was the next best thing to sitting inside a working auto-doc or having a real physician.

“My squad was searching for a group of travelers that had unauthorized tech.” Standtall replied, waving over to his team’s medic to come administer aid. “That is when we saw the Muffincake raiders rushing in here. We were ordered to fall back to base, but I saw your distress beacon when your vitals were dropping.”

Saved by her armor. Gangrene let out a weak laugh, wincing as her everywhere hurt. “The buddy-beacon, huh?” She’d forgotten about that feature in her armor. Had she remembered, she would have disabled it. Her oversight just saved her life. Also, Standtall failed to recognize her, saving her from a most awkward situation.

“Yes, that is how we found you. Now, where is your squad? Identify yourself.” Standtall ordered. He held a very authoritative stance, widening his shoulders and leaning down at the mare’s head while the medic assessed her injuries.

Her numb, slow to recover mind processed his demand, and she found an adequate, albeit rude response for the unwelcome savior. “I work alone, you idiot! I don’t answer to you!” Gangrene hissed, giving a soft cry as the medic extracted the metal bolt out of her leg. She cursed, slamming her head into the ground. That pain was something she would later associate with childbirth, popping something out of a small hole as it clings to your insides and stretch a wide gash open in your body.

The large metal-wrapped stallion had never met such arrogance or fortitude in anypony except superiors and subordinates! But after seeing that she handled all but four of Muffincakes men had him believing the former. “You work alone...I...I am sorry ma’am, I didn’t realize!” Standtall sputtered out, offering her a salute. “Forgive my insubordination!”

Gangrene was confused, why was this crusader saluting her and acting like that? The rest of the squad was just as confused, Silver Tongue, a familiar rude mare trotted up and took a glance at Gangrene, looking at her damaged armor and half of her exposed face. She failed to recognized the yellow mare. “Uh, sir, why are you saluting her like that? She’s probably some AWOL patsy!” The mare chuffed.

“Silver tongue, watch your mouth! We’re in the presence of a Star Paladin!” Standtall barked.

A collective ‘what’ spat from the helmets of a half-dozen confused Steel Rangers. “Sir, you can’t be serious! A Star Paladin? There’s no way we wouldn’t have known!” Many of them were in agreement with Silver Tongue that Gangrene was indeed an AWOL patsy that they should bring in for discipline.

If their superior officer believed she was a Star Paladin, Gangrene would act the part and convince them to do her a little favor. She pushed the medic away, “Get offa me, I’m fine!” She began with one lie, she wasn’t fine, she was in an immense amount of pain and was coming down off a wicked cocktail of combat drugs that had probably nearly put her into cardiac arrest. Once she was on her shaky hooves she shouted out, “You got me!” She confessed, stamping her hoof onto one of the fallen raiders, causing the corpse to gush a small fountain of red, “I am indeed Star Paladin Daisy-Chain of the great Steel Ranger’s 44th Division from Phillydelphia!” Certainly it was a lie, but it was something that would take them forever to check up on. Daisy Chain was actually the name of a rather once-popular food joint that she had holed up in years ago during a raid on a slave caravan, not that these Rangers would ever find

out!

“I knew it!” Standtall gasped, losing his composure and trotting in place, “It’s no wonder you beat all those raiders unarmed! And your modified armor! I really like how the horn got worked in there...” He was starting to gush a little, and coming from such a large stallion that dwarfed Gangrene several times over made it even more strange.

“If I wanted you to lick my flank cheeks I would have ordered you to, CRUSADER!” Gangrene shouted, snarling. Standtall resumed his ‘at attention’ stance. “Why is Standtall the only wiggly PONY AT ATTENTION!?” Gangrene shouted again, if she was going to be a Star Paladin, she was going to be the boss here. All of the Steel Rangers fell into line, save for a very indignant Silver Tongue.

“Is there a reason why you’re not falling into line?” Gangrene asked, though internally she was sweating bullets. If even one of them saw through her act she’d be worse off than when the raiders were about to behead her.

“I don’t buy it! So what if you took on a group of these chowder heads, you still lost and we had to save you! I expect some gratitude, chain of command or not!” Silver Tongue spat, rearing up to stomp both hooves down in disgust. “Who do you think you a--Augh!”

Gangrene had heard enough, the unicorn lifted the insubordinate ranger into the air with the grip of her telekinesis. A painful exercise for the unicorn, given her current condition that her suit had yet to rectify, but something she took great pleasure in. “I am your superior officer and unless you want to get demoted to battering ram, cut the sass!” Gangrene said, barely suppressing a giggle.

“No! No! Anything but that!” Silver Tongue wailed, her legs wagging at the air, her armor clanking and shifting with her ambling air kicking. “Put me down! Put me down!” Silver Tongue cried, remembering her run-in with a particular mad stallion that had used her as a mace to beat Standtall senseless.

“Ma’am, permission to speak freely, ma’am!” Standtall barked.

“Granted.” Gangrene replied, shaking Silver Tongue in her magical grasp.

“I don’t think Silver Tongue meant it, ma’am, also, she’s still sore from being thrown around by somepony earlier, ma’am!” Standtall informed her, still saluting. He was quite a polite Crusader when he was addressing a superior. *Just like every brown-nosing Steel Ranger*, Gangrene thought bitterly.

“I’ll be lenient this one time.” Gangrene promised, setting the terrified Silver Tongue down. The Steel Rangers moved to make space for her and Silver Tongue took her position. They all saluted, waiting orders from Gangrene.

“I know you were all ordered to fall back, perhaps you’d offer to take me along.” She rattled, half-pacing, half-limping back and forth in front of them. “I am here on an important mission! You see, there’s a VIP--Very Important Pony to my branch in Phillydelphia here. With the attack going on I am sure they’re in danger! I know I owe you a great amount of gratitude, but I need help to complete this mission!” She lied shamelessly, leading a group of Rangers into the grinder didn’t bother her, she was going to put their skills to use saving the mall from those pastry loving loons.

“If you require any further motivation other than my order overriding your current standing order, if you gaze to your left you’ll see a burning orphanage.” She added, giving a nod to her once somewhat decent and comfortable home. “This home for the needy was next to a clinic run by a kindly elderly mule that still stayed true to the practice of handing out lollipops after giving shots!” A few of the rangers exchanged glances, but indeed they did look where she was pointing. Gangrene continued, “I know that our chief priority is to relieve tribals of technology they are not responsible enough to use for themselves.” She said with forced and false honesty, the words were bitter in her mouth and it made her want to vomit into her slowly self-repairing helmet. The self regenerating and self medicating armor was the only thing she missed from being a Steel Ranger. Too bad the only real good perk came with mandatory military service for life in an oppressive regime she hated.

The mare turned around, pacing back along the line of troops at attention, continuing her charade in belting tones that made her throat feel hoarse and scratchy. “I do not know how you Branch 25ers handle things, but in Phillydelphia we do not stand for raiders murdering lil kids or elderly good doctors! I am going to ask you to follow me into battle to teach these feral pastry fuckers a lesson in bullet etiquette! I am going to retrieve my VIP, and we are going to do our Ministry proud! Are you with me?” The mare knew how to act, having listened to her fair share of speeches from her own blow-hard superiors. The former Steel Ranger put on an act so convincing, she figured she’d even be able to fool Elder Haywire of the local chapter!

A collective ‘Hoo-RAH’ came from the ranks before her. Gangrene’s little act had worked for the most part, save for a less than excited shout from Silver Tongue. As much as she hated the Steel Rangers, she hated the Muffincakes even more at this moment.

Giving her home one sad lingering look, the yellow mare clad in steel ranger armor left it behind, moving out with her commandeered squad to go put some hurt on the Muffincakes ravaging the mall. She would be in fighting shape in less than an hour, time she didn't have. Good thing Standtall looked sturdy! She had the massive stallion take point, leading the pack.

Silver Tongue glared daggers at the wounded 'Star Paladin' through her visor. She didn't trust her, she may be the only one that Gangrene could not convince.--And that would become a problem later.

The foodcourt had fared no better, it was a hot zone of activity, mostly due to the resistance put up by the patrons of '**Donuts Extreme**'. The other shops had been ransacked, raided for foodstuffs and sweets, and any sign of joy that had once been felt here died under a hail of insults, horror, and shattered dreams. The only shop that stood unmolested was the '**Wartime Rations Bakery**' that sat unmolested. Unbeknownst to all those hiding upon its roof, that building was to not be damaged, for once this place was conquered, that building was to be the main hub of the Muffincake's business in this sizeable outpost.

"Hello everybody! My name's Cradle Robber! I am here to demand total and complete surrender of all Misfits, Vipers, and would-be heroes in the next few moments or I'll be forced to start executing our prisoners at the plaza! But feel free to take your time, we have a surplus of delicious little prisoners." The Public Announcement systems blared a sick threat from the vocal cords of an insane, twisted raider. The old megaphones rattling dusts over the high pitched wail of static.

This was worse than Keena had thought. The whole place was swarming with groups of those vile raiders clad in welding masks and industrial tools, spreading fear and death. The Hippogryph shushed a few shaking ponies she had brought to safety with her when she had gone into hiding. The massive inflatable Pinkie Pie on the '**Wartime Rations Bakery**' was as conspicuous as you could get for a building styled after a military surplus store done to the theme of gingerbread houses. The inflatable display's large size covered the back half of the roof, keeping those Keena brought with her out of sight and hopefully out of mind of those vile raiders below.

Her beak set to a grim frown she could only watch as the raiders began rushing into the donut shop in a long stream of cursing and violence. She knew the settlers of this mall would not go down without a fight, having watched several of those brave souls getting pinned to a wall by those terrible bolt launchers.

"Just huddle up and keep quiet." Keena chirped soothingly to the small throng of ponies. She was

sad to see she couldn't even save half of the ponies in the food court before it became so swarmed she could not risk another attempt to scoop up another pony. She flexed her stiff, sore wings, still trying to catch her breath. Some of those ponies had been adults, bigger than her! She was very winded.

"T-thankyou misses birdy lady." One young foal was just one of the many thanks she received. The soft keen of the phoenix that had used its fires to power the grill the '**The Spit**' was among the grateful whispers. Keena had saved the elegant bird's master since the phoenix could not carry her.

"It was the least I could do." Keena clucked, offering a half-hearted smile to them. She watched the carnage below. Her talons tugged at the strap of her leather shoulder satchel, making sure it was still secure, the reassuring weight of her carbine was gone from her sling's strap, reminding her how helpless she was to do anything. She prayed that no matter how many raiders they threw at Steelgraft, he'd come out on top. She knew he would, for she was helpless to intervene without a weapon. "I wish I could do more with my talons other than pray, but it is all I can do for those still fighting down there." The world seemed so unfair and suddenly dark for the follower of Celestia's Divine Light. She almost felt as if she had been forsaken, that all light was to fade to blackness for these people.

The PA system crackled to life and blared over the battlefield that had once been a home and place of business for so many. "Well, I still hear gunfire! Unless it's our boys shooting for the hell of it? Is it?" Cradle Robber had a brief discussion in the background with another, soft that it was scarcely heard over the speakers. "Oh, it's not our boys? Alright! Guess that means I introduce our first lovely executie! And my oh my is she an executie! Come 'ere lil filly, what's your name?"

"M-my name is...It's Twist-Top." A young fillie's voice came over the speakers.

"And how old are you pumpkin?~" Cradle Robber's voice asked with mocking sweetness.

"S-six..." The terrified foal replied, starting to cry.

"Well, Twist-Top, good news! You get to be first on the guillotine ride! As much as we'd love to just make your name relevant to how we remove your head, we're a lot more interested in seeing this toy in action! Isn't that right, boys?" The roar and cheers were so loud that several speakers blew out, spitting sparks and groaning weak static. "There is some good news for you little Twist-Top...I'm going to make sure you don't die a virgin!" A mad cackle heralded the screams of the little filly, the PA system was filled with cheers, hisses, and the most heart-wrenching cries of a little filly begging for it to end.

Keena's heart sank, her faith was tested, and the darkness to come overwhelmed her to tears. The hippogriff bowed her head and pulled the pendant she kept under a fold of her cleric barding. She always felt safe in the white cloth with golden trim, as if the cowled vestments of her faith was all the armor she ever needed. It wasn't enough for the end of this waning day. She stroked the medallion of the sun with a gentle stroke and held it to her chest. "Would any of you care to pray with me?" She asked, ever hopeful for fellowship as the morale of the group took a heavy toll to the sounds of the filly being abused.

Some nodded, some vomited, and others just broke down and cried. Keena prayed to her goddess, the one that brought life and light. "Celestia bless this day you grant us and hear the cry of your humble friends and loved ones. As this day turns to beautiful night, ushered by your sister Luna, may your light stay with me always. Grant us the power to vanquish the darkness in the hearts of evil and plant friendship in it's place. Deliver me from---" She broke down, crying, this was just so hard for her to bear. "Please, Celestia, hear me!" She begged. "Give me a sign you're still here, that you can hear our plight!"

The ponies she had saved would have questioned Keena's sanity if it wasn't for the sound of the little filly being raped weren't driving them to shuddering tears and retching gags to vomit. The emptied their stomach and let despair wash over them, soaking their very natures to the bone.

"Was that good for you baby? No? Oh well. She's quite the lay! I think I'm in love!" The PA announced Cradle Robber's pleasure at having his way with a helpless little filly. "I think I'll keep her fo--woops oh no, my hoof slipped!" Cradle laughed, it was obviously no accident. The PA speaker caught the tail end of the firm sound of a blade meeting flesh and the cheers that echoed afterwards. "Wow, her head rolled pretty far! Next executie goes in three minutes!"

The sign Keena asked for came as her faith almost died with that poor filly. Though it was an unexpected sign! The front of the store Donuts Extreme exploded outwards, turning tables, stools, and even the once animated neon sign on the exterior into deadly shrapnel. The raiders that had been funneling into the store were eviscerated in a display of carnage unmatched!

The concussive force of the blast flowed through the area in a wave, causing the inflatable Pinkie Pie to wobble and quickly deflate as several sharp objects pierced it. Everyone took cover, laying flat on their bellies to avoid meeting the same fate as the inflatable display.

'Fweeeeeeeeepbbtts' --The Pinkie Pie display flopped over the front of the store, letting out a single, sad, long fart of stale air before it hung, lifeless and empty. Then one final, tiny little 'squeak' of air before it was completely shriveled and empty.

“W-what kind of sign is that?” Keena groaned, lifting her wings off of two young ponies she had sheltered beneath them. She gazed at the devastation, her beak agape. In the center of the storefront wreckage, wreathed in a settling cloud of smoke was Steelgraft, wielding a blade of golden sunlight, victorious over the raiders that had beset the foodcourt in one inspiring move.

“Celestia...” Keena muttered, her head crest perking forward in astonishment. Her sharp amber eyes wide, processing the imagery she saw before her. “He struck them down with sunlight and fire...With her sunlight and fire! Is that my calling, goddess? Is this champion to be redeemed in your name?” She was speaking to her medallion, holding it close in trembling talons. Celestia still listened, she still cared! A single drop of sunlight had illuminated the fear in her heart. “Even in the coming night, your light shall reach us!”

So that’s how the rest of the party is faring? I don’t buy this *‘Blade of Sunlight’* for one moment! It’s obvious that you’re just wielding that stupid energy chainsaw! Oh, but I am curious how you blew up the shop! Argh, fine, here’s some damn EXP, but I expect a damn explanation for how you pulled that off for the next chapter!

I am swiftly becoming the most disgruntled Game Master in all of PnP gaming history! No, you do not get to level up! This was a sub-chapter! A Shortie! If anything, your party members leveled up!