

Knowing Is Half The Battle

"In a battle all you need to make you fight is a little hot blood and the knowledge that it's more dangerous to lose than to win."

"Sorry, Flare, You're out."

"You can't do this! This is an outrage! It's just not fair! Listen, we've been through this so long, you can't... you can't just do this." I shook my head and let Flare rage on. I knew he would never understand. But it had to be this way.

"Don't worry, Flare." Serenity trotted up to him and patted him on the shoulder. "You can be on my team next time." Not bloody likely.

"C'mon," I said to Serenity, as I trotted over to the far end of the field. "Lets get this over with."

"I can't wait to get started, but first let me set a few rules." Serenity stood between us, hopping on top of the soccer ball and steadying it with her magic, "It's of utmost importance that there are no unfair advantages. So no wings, no magic, and no heaving around huge dangerous guns."

"Subtlety is not huge." It was a perfectly sized weapon, thank you very much.

"It's the biggest motherfucking gun I've ever seen," Flare said, waving his arms around to demonstrate. "It makes you look like a huge silver tank that explodes shit. Also, Subtlety is a dumb name." Oh, he did not just go there. I was seriously going to soccer the shit out of him.

"I'm not taking Subtlety off." We were standing in some random dirt field with two dead trees across from each other as goal posts, and we could be attacked at any time by any number of Wasteland unmentionables. We had moved a considerable distance the day and a half after the tunnel incident, so at least the Baies were not likely to find us.

"Please, Hired," she said, making her face all pouty. "Pretty please, mo-"

"Fine," I cut her off. "Not because you did that sad thing you do when you don't get your way. Only on the condition you stop calling me mommy." She just pouted more. "Stop that. Just agree so we can play." Then her eyes got all big and watery and tied a knot in my gut. Against my better judgement, I said, "Fine! We'll talk about it later, okay?" Grinning just a bit, she nodded.

Grumbling and taking off Subtlety, I had the distinct feeling I had just been outsmarted by a foal. Again. It seemed that being outsmarted constantly was half of what I did. The other half was, of course, getting captured.

"Any other rules?"

"Uh. First to five points wins, gooooo!" said Serenity, with all the enthusiasm a little filly could muster. Incidentally, a lot.

With that she leapt off the ball and gave it a great kick with her tiny hoof. It went about three feet before

rolling to a stop in front of Flare. Not wasting any time, the blue pegasus was off with a blur, kicking the ball faster and faster with each step. He was moving so fast he was almost hard to keep track of. Damn pegasi.

I ran over to intercept him as Serenity tried to run her way back down the field. The pegasus was far too fast for me, and zipped easily past me. Turning as fast as I could, I reached out with my mouth and grabbed onto the tattered remains of Flare's jumpsuit. There was a slight tug and then a tear as his worn jumpsuit finally gave way and ripped right off revealing his naked blue body. After having seen him always wearing clothes, it looked a little obscene.

With a kick, the soccer ball flew through the air, ricocheted off our goal tree, and flew back smacking Flare in the face with a thud and a wail. So far the score was: 1 – Flare, 0 – Serenity and Silver Storm, and 1 – for soccer kicking our collective asses.

Patting Flare on the back, I said, “Stop being a wimp.” Looking down at his flank for a second, I continued. “What is that supposed to mean?” I motioned to the open book tattooed on his flank.

“Huh. Fuck, you finally saw it?” He sighed heavily and fakely. “I’ve been trying to hide it. It ain’t very badass, is it? I was hoping for like a grenade, or an explosion, or an exploding grenade!” That was all well, but didn’t answer the actual question. “It’s for my story tellin’. When I was just a little buck, me and a few other pegasi accidentally fell through the floor of the Enclave base into the Dise tunnels. We were young and weren’t good fliers so we couldn’t get out, and nopony know we were there. So we had to find our own way out. Well, we know how bad those tunnels can be. So I helped keep the tension down by telling stories about our old teacher’s farts--” Serenity giggled. “--and how they saved the world from Discord. When we finally were found and returned, I also found my cutie mark.”

“It looks stupid,” I said dully.

“So? And what do those rocks on your flank mean?” he nickered at me. “Were you an expert slingshot-er? Did you used to eat rocks? Well, its gotta be somethin’, and I’m fresh outta ideas.” With a final grin, he trotted across the dirt field after our soccer ball.

If you are curious as to where we found a functional soccer ball: Serenity found a deflated one, and used a lot of her spare time as we travelled fixing it up. It’s fairly easy to fix things up when you don’t have to walk yourself, and I was sure magic helped as well. For once though, she was not riding on my back out of laziness, but because she was wounded enough I forbade her from tiring herself out. We were all wounded of course; it had been over a day since the tunnel, but without healing potions our wounds kept. Flare, for his part, could still barely keep off the ground never mind the flying tricks he usually preformed just to have a simple conversation.

I was mostly fine though. The wound on my flank had scabbed, as had the cut along my chest. Though sometimes, if I closed my eyes, I heard the wind whispering to me. I knew, for sure, that this time it was just my imagination but...

This soccer game was honestly more about keeping us active and making sure we were prepared for a raider attack than anything else. Well, I saw it that way. Both Flare and Serenity claimed it was 'Fun'. I was mostly adverse to the idea of fun, but I was outvoted.

"Stop it stallin', slowpoke." Serenity ran past me, the sun shining on her smiling face. Sometimes it was hard to believe it was actually back. I could see it shining down upon our game, but even looking at it... it was unreal. The pegasi closed up the sky 200 years ago, and there was no way it could be back now. Not without a miracle, and if there was one thing I learned in the wasteland, it was not to trust miracles.

"HIRED!" Serenity squealed stomping her little hoof. "We're playing! Can't let Stupid get another point!"

"Right." Nodding my head, I was off. The ball was back in the middle of our makeshift field so I charged at it. Flare nearly got there first, but I dove. The edge of my hoof kicked the ball, sending it rolling just out of his reach. He turned fast, but Serenity was already there kicking the ball ahead of her, and doing her damndest not to trip.

She failed. While she was running along, the ball slipped under her hoof and sent her tumbling over it with an "Oof." Flare started to zip past her, but slowed down to see if she was okay. Just enough time for me to grab his tail with my mouth before he zoomed off again. His chin smacked against the ground as he fell. I caught up to the ball, and pushed it forward and kept on running.

The recently-recovered Serenity called out to me as she ran alongside. Not worrying about the fact that a filly could run as fast as me, I kicked up the ball towards her. Suddenly, Flare jumped out of nowhere. He dove towards the ball with his wings outstretched. Inching closer as if in slow motion, he made a grab for the ball.

And missed.

He slammed into the ground with a shower of dirt. Serenity jumped up and lowered her head into the ball, hitting it with a thick thud. When she landed back on the ground Serenity grinned to herself and leaned forward to watch the ball. Tilting her head in confusion, she turned to me. "Did it hit?"

I chuckled. It took only a slight tug to slide the impaled ball off of her horn. Letting the ball deflate and fall to the ground I said, "Looks like it's game over." Serenity groaned, rubbing the area around her horn with her hoof, and murmured an apology.

"Welp." Flare grinned pulling his face out of the dirt (or more accurately: pulling his face out with the dirt). "I guess that means I win."

"No."

That was not a voice I recognized. Turning to the sound, I saw a whole gaggle of metal ponies. "We win." One of the ponies stepped forward. She was completely unrecognizable from the rest due to their similar power armour, but that huge ass gun on the back made it clear to me she was in charge.

So I did what I always did when faced with impossible odds. "Fuck off." I stepped forward and glowered at the Steel Ranger. I had met them once before way up north somewhere, and I was not in the mood for their dickery. "We're trying to play soccer."

The helmeted pony turned her head to me. I imagined she raised her eyebrow. "The fuck are you?" The pony shook its head. "We have been ordered to take Captain Flare, and any travelling companions, into custody, by orders of Elder Chunky Soup." Really? That was a dumb name. "Comply and you will be spared until your guilt or innocence can be determined."

I moved to fire Subtlety. Only to clack my teeth together hard as the bridle, and battle-saddle, were still lying in a heap. I knew I shouldn't have taken them off. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew Flare was adding this to the list of times I was captured. Even though it was totally his fault because he...

"Captain Flare?"

"... Can you feel that, Dise? Does it warm your very soul? It's a new day and still the sun is with us, and ain't that just glorious? They say no news is good news, but in this case, news is also good news. The NCA Chairpony has reached a non-hostility agreement with the Minotaur Chieftain under the belief that we have reached a new era, and peace should reign. A bit sappy if you ask me. The Minotaurs still deny the slaughter at the South Canyon Base, but have offered their condolences. In related news, the NCA council has voted 10/10 to declare 'Sunshine Day' as a holiday across all NCA States, and the four gangs of Dise have ratified the decision as well, with Mayhem taking his place as the new head of The Mustangs.

"In other news, bodies are still being counted from the horrific battle that exploded a few nights ago. In addition to the dozens of Mustangs and Baises killed outside The Moon, including former leader of The Mustangs, Roy, multiple civilian casualties were confirmed after the fighting spilled over into the Dise Residential area near the eastern wall. Finally, a NCA guard stationed on the wall fell to his death when an explosion shook the wall." That would be my bad.

I walked along solemnly as chains clinked between my legs. They were tight enough so I couldn't run, but could still walk, though slowly and carefully. As we marched, the Steel Rangers seemed more interested in Flare than me. They had him chained heavily, with four knights flanking him, and had his injured wings tied to his chest with rope. All I got was a single guard stalking beside me. Serenity was, thankfully, allowed to ride on said guards back, though her hooves were tied together so she could barely move at all. Who knew, the filly could be dangerous. She cried at killing an insane ghoul, the idea of her taking down a Steel Ranger was just silly.

"Confusion still reigns over the nature of Roy Mustang's death." We were lead up a rutted path on a hill not far from where we were captured. While not permitted to talk, I was given full permission to play my pipbuck as loud as possible. I had avoided it since the tunnel, worried about the effects of the battle, but anything was better than angsty silence. *"Molly of the Baises has denied responsibility for the death, claiming she was attempting to bring Roy in alive for his alleged murder of peaceful power-plant workers a few weeks ago."*

As we crested the hill I saw something off the left side. Sunlight bounced off the structure, making me wish I'd put on my sunglasses before being captured. Off in the distance the structure cut into the sky like a skinny, white knife, with wisps of clouds surrounded its tip.

"Mayhem, who has taken up the role of leader of The Mustangs, said, and I quote, 'Molly's excuse is laughable'. In his opinion Molly was clearly pulling an assassination strike against the former leader, and claims the real question is whether she was working alone or with NCA backers."

There was a burst of static before the the familiar voice of Mayhem played over my pipbuck. *"No, I'm not saying the NCA put out a hit on Roy. Alls I am saying is The Mustangs and NCA have never gotten along, ya dig? And if the Baises are honest, and only wanted him alive, then who else in Dise would want our noble leader dead?"* You would, I thought spitefully, And me. *"It shames me to say we were woefully unprepared for Molly's treachery, and our hotel has been damaged considerably. If water prices get higher soon, I hope your listeners don't blame the Mustangs, not after everything we've done to keep it running, even after multiple attacks against our ponies and character."*

Mr. New Haygas was back. *"Bored already? Well don't turn the channel just yet, because the news is done, and it's time for your favourite tunes! Brought to you 200 years after their popularity killed the world."*

"End to the hostilities," my guard scoffed to the side of me, "my bloody hoof." She was a female, and through her armour that was all I could tell. Even with it, I was a fair bit taller than her, but she had guns, and they had taken Subtlety from me. "This. This is nothing but an armistice for a week, Maybe two, a month if we're lucky, but there will be war." The mare looked at me, her helmet's eyes glowing, "The NCA got megaspelled."

I said nothing, ignoring her. Not being permitted to speak made it difficult to comment on such things. "You wanna know what I think?" I nodded dumbly, keeping my eyes on Serenity who somehow managed to sleep on my guards metal back. She could sleep anywhere. "Well, the Chairpony of the Council is from Sandy Stifle, and they want to end the war. Can't vote yes to war right as the sun comes back, oh no. He'd be lynched. He's waiting till they attack first."

"They did." I nearly gasped as Serenity murmured on the Ranger's back, not as asleep as she seemed. "Heard on the radio." Apparently she did not get the "no talking" memo.

"Ah, you're a smart little one." Serenity smiled proudly, though her eyes stayed closed. "No pony knows what caused the megaspell ta go off. Most ponies assume minotaurs, but the minotaurs haven't seriously attacked anypony for years. So why now? 'Less the minotaurs get aggressive, and aggressive that can't be denied, ain't nothing going to happen."

"So?" I figured the ban on talking was lifted.

"So, means the NCA will trigger the war without telling their respective cities, get it? Force the minotaurs to attack. Then boom. World goes to shit, and Celestia above can see how we ponies eat each other alive." I imagined she was smiling at me, but really, who could tell?

"You seem to be helping." I said, as deadpan as I could go.

"Not my job to help." Of course, she was what, only a knight? Way I heard it, you had to be at least a Paladin to have an opinion. "I take my orders and complete them without question," she sighed, looking off past the hill we were cresting. Behind us, I could still see the huge grey walls of Dise and the buildings that peeked over it. The giant pink pony head seemed to be staring at me from across the wasteland... not creepy at all. Turning back to my guard, I saw what she was looking at.

Off in the distance and slightly right-ish was a large compound with small grey walls. The vast complex seemed to have a series of buildings lined up along the edges of the walls, while in the centre it looked

like rows of green things were lined up in rows. It was very, very confusing so I sorta looked away.

"The NCA farm," the Steel Ranger chuckled. "Used to be the Baises', but it never grew as much as needed. Apparently the NCA knows a little something of farming in these radiation-blighted lands, some secret or what have you; they think to use it to buy Dise's membership into the NCA."

"How interesting." I said, trying to suppress a yawn. Why did ponies always lecture at me? Was it so much to ask to be allowed to do a job without somepony feeling it necessary to explain in minute details the exact political strategies involved? I didn't care about the NCA, their farms, or their allies. I just wanted to escape these steel assholes, find the nearest NCA outpost, and collect my bounty for killing Roy.

Also, I would like to go a day without being captured.

That would be nice, but even with Celestia above smiling down on me, I don't think she liked me enough to grant my wish.

"Are we there yet?" Serenity complained, after a few minutes of pipbuck music. I was honestly wondering the same thing too. As much fun as it was to be a captive wandering the wastes, I couldn't wait until we got to wherever it was we were going so I could escape already.

"Soon." She smirked a bit (I assumed. Damn masks did nothing for facial expressions) as the whole group stopped. "We need to blindfold you."

For fuck's sake.

We were marched for what felt miles, and, chances are, it was. In the dark, I wasn't able to see much of anything (occasionally sending shivers down my spine as it reminded me of that tunnel), but I could feel. Contrary to popular belief, my brain worked perfectly fine, as did all my senses. The wind was blowing south when we walked and tussled up my hair, so I knew that when we started walking downhill and the wind stopped blowing that we had travelled down the north side of the hill. I knew by the feeling under my hooves that we moved off the dirt and onto pavement, and judging by the fact we did not walk very far before going inside, I'd to guess it was little more than a small store off some main road. Perhaps a rest stop, with a secret backdoor.

That's right, I planned ahead. Eat your heart out doubters. I can, in fact, learn.

From there, we walked down, and down, and down. I felt a twinge of anxiety in my gut as we continued descending. I know I have been bringing up my travels into the dark a lot recently, but that sort of thing is not something that leaves you quickly. It had only been a few days, and I'd a feeling the memories would haunt me for long after. Or I'd go insane. Either way worked if you asked me. Since I was a child I'd always been just a step away from insanity, so I was kind of interested to see the other side.

We were led through a series of musty smelling rooms, something between rotten paper and stale air, before being led into a room that very definitely smelled like manure. Of course that would be our jail cell, because c'mon? How obvious was that? They could have at least put in an air freshener so we would be surprised at the horrid state of our apartments.

Of course, when the blindfold was removed and artificial light blinded my eyes, I was surprised. Not by the fact that our cell was dirty, and we had a just bucket to shit in, but by the fact Serenity was nowhere to be seen.

I turned, and pressed my face against the nearest Steel Ranger's mask. "Where. Is. She?" There was no room in my voice for questioning.

"W-while she is here she is not your con-"

"Where. Is. She?" I repeated. If he thought for a second this was a show and I was just posturing, then I was going to rip open his tin can head.

"I s-said."

"Where!"

"Upstairs." He pushed me away roughly and took a second to regain his composure. "Her wounds are being looked at and treated, and she will be given proper boarding for her duration so long as she does not cause trouble. You are our captives, but our directive stops us from harming foals, or putting them in deplorable conditions." He shoved me roughly.

After all that was through, I was shoved into my cage. The whole dirty room was cut in half by a row of rusty steel bars. My part had such lovely amenities like a pile of rags for a bed, a shitting bucket, and what appeared to be a half eaten mole-rat. Dinner, maybe?

The other side of the room was lovingly equipped with the stairs higher into the compound, a table with a single seat and a large overhanging light. Classic interrogation style, if I was any judge, and seeing as I'd spent plenty of time in The Room during my employment with The Mustangs, I'd say I was a good judge. The whole room seemed similar to a Stable-style complex but more concrete cleanness than metal and stone 'we're totally not evil at all'-ness.

As befit their stupid attempt at intimidation, two more Steel Rangers came down the steps dragging Flare along. As befit Flare's character, he grinned all the way to the table as they slammed him onto the seat. His head slumped dramatically as the light was positioned over his head.

"OH CELESTIA!" he screamed a second later, his wings poofing out dramatically! "It was me! I did it! I never meant to, I was forced! Please, please don't hurt me! I'll tell you! Tell you everything please nooooooo!" He squealed and squirmed, and I tried to stifle a chuckle. The two guards who had dragged him down took their places on either side of Flare, while the one who pushed me into my cell paced at the other end of the table from Flare.

He took each step solemnly and slowly, as if to contemplate the meaning and purpose of each step. The type of actions designed to make the watcher nervous, to show that this was a pony who knows what he meant to do. With a smooth movement, the helmet hissed, and he carefully lifted it off his head, and placed it on the table. Inside he turned out to be a bright pink stallion (I snickered) with a short cropped green mane, with a hilariously drooping moustache. Serenity would have liked him.

"Tell me," he said, his voice much higher now that his mask was off, "Tell me everything."

"Okay." Flare gasped, stomping his fore-hooves on the table, and bringing his wings back to bear. "Come closer." The mustachioed stallion leaned in, his pink coat glowing slightly in the light. "Closer." He leaned closer. "I...I.."

He paused dramatically.

"Stole the cookie from the cookie jar!" I chuckled from off to the side, and he burst out laughing. "It was me! I did it! You finally caught me. It's the noose, I expect." He rubbed his chin, grinning at his own wit. "Might I say, that moustache suits you. Says, 'I may be a pretty filly, but I am also badass'. Really. Trust me." He snickered, and furrowed his brow.

The steel ranger slammed his hooves down, cracking the table. "I AM PALADIN CURLY FRIES, AND YOU WILL SHOW ME RESPECT!" Flare lasted all of three seconds in silence before bursting out laughing making the Stallion's moustache twirl in rage. "Enough," he sighed.

There was a thud and a gasp as one of the steel rangers put an iron hoof into Flare's gut. He coughed and grinned, as Curly Fries glowered from across the table. "Don't you fuck with me," the pink stallion said, his voice low in rage. "I know who you are."

"Flare," Flare reminded the his interrogator. "So I guess you heard the stories right? Listen, it's not true. Okay, so maybe I killed one or two knights with my giant swinging co-" and another armoured hoof. This time the blow sent him slamming into the table, blood dripping from his mouth. "Okay. I lied just a tiny bit."

"Do you think you're funny?"

"He is funny." I said just loud enough to be heard from my cage.

"You're next, cunt," Curly Fries said, waving a hoof at me but not bothering to give me a glance. "As for you, Flare, you will talk." I resisted the overwhelming urge to mention that he had been talking. Just not saying anything. "What are the Enclave planning?"

"Lots, and more." He waved his arms. "Gonna have a potluck, week after Friday! Everyone's invited, you shoul-" Another iron hoof sent him reeling and grinning. "What did you expect?"

"Information. And then your death." Curly Fries laughed. "After what you did to the Steel Rangers five years ago." Five? That didn't make much sense, just how old was Flare? "I was there. I saw you killing innocents! CHILDREN!" Flare visibly grimaced, and I was more confused than ever. "And now you stand here acting like we're the bad guys."

"Yeah." Flare smiled through bloody teeth. It was a grim smile, and it looked horrifying and foreign on his face. "Hah, funny story, that. Steel Rangers spent their days sniping us back at the mountain, we go down try to ward you off, and we're called foal killers."

"You are."

"Yup." His smile waned and he grimaced. "I remember. Don't get me wrong, Mr. Moustache, I remember.

You should too; you were there. We gave you a fucking warning. Told you fuckers to piss off or there'd be war. Told you that if you didn't want casualties to move your non-combatants. You didn't. We attacked. I had good aim." He shook his head. "That wasn't a funny story, but it changes nothing." He leaned forward. "Your side used foals as shields."

"And yet. You still attacked, you murderous bastard."

"Aww, you wound me." He put a hoof over his heart. "You've had five years, and this is what you come up with? You're as silly as you look, and you look fierce silly. Besides," Flare flipped his mane, "you think the Remnants forgot what the Steel Rangers did back when we first lost the sky?"

Everything goes back and back, doesn't it? The Steel Ranger hated the Remnants, who hated the wasteland ponies, and all our sins and rivalries can be traced back in the annals of history. Minotaurs killed some NCA, now the NCA kill them back. Zebras kill ponies, ponies kill zebras, war flares, bombs drops and after the end, the presence of our forefathers is felt, and the wounds still burn deep, but after so long, who could even remember what the war was about? In the end, violence begat more, and I had to wonder if it was worth it. If maybe all this hate and violence wasn't solving anything, and never would. I'm not a smart pony, but I couldn't help but feel that all these factions and allies and grudges over who flag you're under solved nothing. That maybe, just maybe, each pony should be judged by who they were, not who they served.

Of course that was silly, cliché, and trite. The world wasn't that simple, but it was nice to think it was.

"Don't quote history at me, you colt," Curly Fries grumbled and stormed as he paced back and forth. "Tell me what the Enclave is planning and I will give you a quick death. You have already been found guilty of murder, but its the least I can do to make your passing easy."

Flare leaned back on his chair. "Slow is fine."

"You're fucking with me."

"Nope." Flare squirmed in the chair for a second, perhaps wondering why they always seemed made to be as least comforting as possible. Almost like they weren't made for ponies at all. "See, I'm not dumb. Hired Gun there is a brick with fewer IQ points, but I got the brains of the operation. Also I'm much funner. I basically have all the best traits, anyway. You see, I think you'll kill me any damn way you please no matter what I say. Talking won't do anything but give you information. So, Fuck. Off."

It seemed that it was the day of epiphanies because I realized something. No matter what I thought of Flare, he was still a solidier. He was trained, presumably since birth, to fight and do solidery things. Among those I could imagine were to stay calm under pressure (his actions in the tunnel shocked me. When he wasn't punching me for freaking out he was telling stories and joking to keep our minds easy...) and withstand interrogation. The entire time I had known him, he had been doing silly things, so much so I had forgotten who he was and where he'd come from.

"Will you still act that way if I take knives to your marefriend?" He pointed dramatically at me.

I let Flare do my laughing for me. "Marefriend! MAREFRIEND!" He kept chuckling even as a kick sent him spiralling off his chair and bleeding. "You fucking kidding... she's ... fuck, she wouldn't fuck me if the

wasteland depended on it. She's some sorta fillyfooler, you dolt. Hah. Fucking marefriend. You're great. We should be a comedian team. I'll tell the stories, you tell the pu-"

He was unceremoniously lifted up and thrown into my cage. As he rolled into the shit bucket, the door slammed behind him and locked shut. "Hey." I said, walking up to the Curly Fries. "Only one bed and bucket."

"Share," he growled, motioning for the two Steel Ranger guards to stay put. With a huff he stormed up the steps burning from ear to ear. I didn't really care about the slop bucket, I just thought the whole thing was hilarious.

Flare slowly rose to his feet and grinned at me. Feeling strangely euphoric, I smiled back, and that made him burst out in laughter. I even chuckled. Just a tiny little bit. When he got himself back under control, we had actual work to do. We were stuck in some Celestia-forsaken bunker, awaiting torture and death by some ponies who weren't bad, just desperate. If I was to guess, anyway.

"They're not so tough." Flare mocked to out silent guards. "A Spark Grenade, or a Spark Pulse Emitter, turns those suits of theirs into little more than fancy weights. Most can't even move."

"A what?" I sat down in what was the closest approximation to a bed we had.

"Its like... a tazer gun. A short pulse from it and ZAP, their armour is deader than Roy Mustang. Steel Rangers stole a bunch a while back, 'long with some energy weapons. They've been trying to reverse engineer Enclave tech, might have a few lying ar... OH! Once we escape we should totally look for some. It'd be awesome. Fuck those bastards or something." We might at that.

A gun of Steel Ranger slaying in the Steel Ranger lair, what are the odds?

Time passed as it often did: slowly and with great amusement as it made the ponies that followed it wait.

I'm not sure if that last sentence made sense, but what I was trying to say it that time passed slowly. Me and Flare took turns pacing, being hungry from barely eating since the tunnel, doing nothing, and using the bucket (at which time the other turned around and whistled loudly, pretending they were not there) so overall it was a lovely time. At least we weren't being chased by ghouls or assaulted by daydreams. In comparison, I guess you could say it was a good day.

"So." I broke the silence. Not because I disliked the silence, any silence with Flare around was to be treated like a rare gem, but because I had to know something and it wasn't going to stop nagging at my mind until I asked. "What happened at..." I groped uselessly for words.

"Bitter Steel Camp." Flare seemed to read my mind, something that happened with an odd frequency by folks around me. I was not a subtle pony. "The foals right?" Yes, the battle Curly Fries spoke of. Of Flare slaughtering foals.

"Did you know they were there?" I gulped, as I asked. Part of me didn't really want to know the answer. As much as Flare annoyed me, the hyper pegasus had grown on me. It would have sucked, having to kill

him.

"Yes." My muscles twinged at the reaction, and I was sure he noticed. My ears roared in rage, but I kept myself controlled. I could not abide the killing of foals, by anypony. It was... not right. "And no. Let me explain." He gulped, and I took a step back, cursing myself ever so slightly.

"It ain't a story I like telling, and I'm a stallion of many stories." He flapped his injured wings for a second and sighed. "I... we sent them a warning a week in advance. We told them to leave or die, we told them if they insisted on fighting they should remove their children. We tried, and tried, and... I thought they listened." He voiced faded and he shook his head. This was not a Flare that I was comfortable with, his voice was sour and dark.

"We attacked at dawn. The morning rain was letting out, and a thick fog blanked the camp. Sail had told me the nightly reports. Lights were seen in the night leaving the camp, and I was so happy they'd heeded our warning." He shook his head. "The Steel Rangers wouldn't leave, but the children.... So we flew. My squad was to hit the flanks and take out supply depots." There was a sad smile on his lips, and tears welling in his eyes. "We did well. My squad took out ten rangers. Zapped them with spark grenades and blew them to pieces with guns and Bunker Buster. So we went to our secondary objective."

"It was a plain building. A store before the war, but we knew they used it as an intelligence and weapons depot for the tech that they 'liberated' from uncivilized wastelanders. So..." He sniffled and rubbed his eyes. "Bunker Buster took it out. A pretty fireball, and I couldn't have been happier. I was going to be promoted to captain, my squad did well, with no casualties. Then I saw him."

He shuddered but kept talking. "The colt running from my blaze. His mane was on fire and he screamed so loud. They kept their children in the same fucking place they kept their bombs!" He screamed, his pink eyes bloodshot and wet with tears. "I killed them... I..." He wiped a tear from his eye. "Yeah... I killed them. I got my promotion, but... I never wanted it after. I heard that scream.... For the rest of my life I'll wake up and hear that scream. It's in my dreams." Was that what he heard down in the tunnel? That scream? "I got a medal, commendations. General Skylight gave me a pat on the back. Then I went back into my room and... and let a part of me die."

He sniffled and looked up at me, the memories clear in his eyes. It felt like I'd been there. Felt the explosions ripple through my body. Smelled the smoke. Heard the scream.

Against my better judgement, I wrapped my good hoof around his neck. And I hugged him.

Part of me hated him for killing foals, but I couldn't kill him. He was doing a better job of it than I ever could.

Ponies have stories right? Sometimes I forgot that. Behind the eyes of each and every pony I met there was a long and detailed tale I couldn't remember, even if I had the chance. Yet it was always there, and it drove them. Sometimes, you meet so many ponies you forget they had a life before, that they existed and did good and evil. They lived, and died, and bore the scars. When you live in the wasteland, everypony has a tragic backstory.

So that was Flare's. I guess it made sense, and while I was sure there was more to that, bringing a pony to tears was not something I enjoyed doing. Once, after cutting my head open by accident, my mother

had told me that big ponies weren't supposed to cry, and I should get all my tears out when I was still a foal. She was lying of course; big ponies cried all the time. I wasn't a smart pony, but I understood why she had to lie. When you're foal, you have to believe in the big ponies, you had to latch onto something and proclaim it strong and just, even if it wasn't. Because you weren't given anything else to believe in.

When I let go of Flare, he smiled up at me. As much fun as waxing poetic was, I think I was out of juice for the day.

"Okay," Flare said, smiling brightly. "Hired Gun!" he said dramatically, so I would forget about his previous bout of emotions. "It is time for you to tell me your tragic backstory! I know you ha-"

"Wait," a guard turned sharply and studied me from under his helmet. "Hired Gun?" That's my totally not fake name. I raised an eyebrow at the guard and nodded. "I remember you... you were guarding a caravan up north right?" I nodded again. "I heard they all got wiped out... how did you survive?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Backlight."

"Come again?"

"Knight Backlight."

"Sorry, it doesn't ring a bell." I shrugged. "I survived by luck... why?"

"I... It's nothing." He squirmed under his armour as his fellow guard gave him a look. "Just. Surprised. Is all... whatever." I liked him. He amused me, and better yet he allowed me to avoid telling Flare anything. I would rather not think about what happened. Which was a lot to not think about.

"Knight Backlight." I grinned up at the stairs as the pink stallion came walking down the stairs, now dressed in Paladin robes instead of his usual power armour. "Do not speak to prisoners." He glided down the stairs with the grace of a Brahmin, and strode up to the Knight. "Are we clear?" The knight nodded.

"Hired Gun, so that's your name?" he strode up to our cage, and wrinkled his nose at the smell.

"Sure." I kicked my metal leg idly, hoping he had a point.

"Tell me. This filly we have upstairs." My shoulder burned suddenly. My eyes darted around the room. Curly Fries was facing me, but the two guards were facing the stairs. Crap, that wasn't good.

Without thinking I grabbed Flare with both hooves and drove him into the ground. "LET HER GO!" I screamed. "OR I KILL HIM!" He gasped, but did not squirm. Shaking him, I smacked his head against the floor ever so lightly. "I swear!"

Everypony turned to look at me. The two guards scrambled to get the keys, but Curly knocked them away and bellowed orders. The door to our cage swung open and Curly was in front of me shouting something I didn't hear. My eyes were fixed on the stairs. The two guards were facing me, backing up slowly to the stairs, as if ready to run for help. "I WILL!" Had to give it a few more seconds.

The burning continued as a brown blur jumped from the stairs. It landed on the first guard who let out a wordless scream. A green energy pulsed from a weapon in its pink magical grasp sending the Knight to its knees, its armour de-activating. The second turned just in time to get lasered in the face by the spark pulse emitter. The small pony in the brown robe turned to me and took off its hood grinning.

Serenity's magic was keeping the knights silent. I loved that resourceful filly.

"Just kidding." I let Flare flop to the floor gasping for air.

"What's that?" Flare pointed suddenly. Curly fries turned and saw the two ponies with my pink filly waving her spark emitter. It wasn't going to work against Curly without his suit, but I'd other plans.

"Catch!" I said. Curly turned to me again, his eyes wide in confusion. I kicked the manure bucket sending it, and its brown contents, over his face.

"What is this I-" I bucked him into the cage, his head ringing in the bucket. The pink body of Curly Fries slumped to the ground, apparently passed out, as brown gunk slithered out of the bucket on his head. Not wasting anymore time, I ran over to the two fallen knights and threw them in the cage as well, before locking it. I didn't know how that pulse emitter whatever worked, but without their suits being active they were basically helpless. They were too heavy to move on their own.

"Sorry, Backlight." I grinned as the door locked. "We'll meet up again later."

Alright, Operation 'Get the Fuck Out' was ready to begin. Smiling, I ruffled Serenity's mane with my hoof causing her to giggle and squirm away. "Nice job. Where'd you get all that?" She was wearing a plain brown robe with a hood, completely unadorned with anything, and that boxy looking pulse emitter was still floating in her magic, a string of green electricity pulsing between its two prongs.

"Upstairs!" she chirped. "Stupid ponies put me in some acolyte's room. He was toying with this magical thingy, and even told me what it did! That silly. So when he wasn't looking I stole it and snuck out." Easy when you had noise nullifying magic. "The robe I found on the top floor. So much stuff! I found Subtlety and Bunker Buster, and all our stuff just thrown in a heap! Can you believe it? This escape is going to be so easy."

Right, easy.

"Hey," Serenity bounced, "how did you know I was coming?"

"Yeah," Flare said, rubbing his neck with a hoof. "I was curious too. Thought you were going to fuck me up for a second there."

Tapping my metal leg with my... uh non-metal leg, I said, "Felt it." Serenity raised an eyebrow. "I don't know. My shoulder burned and it was.. familiar. I'm not sure, but I knew it was Serenity's magic. Right?"

Flare stared blankly at me and turned his head to gape at Serenity, before looking back at me. "She can... do that? FEEL magic like a damn unicorn or something? Innit, like, *not* an Earth Pony thing?" Maybe he was upset that an earth pony got cool powers, for once. "She can really do that? Really. Are you guys

fucking with me, 'cause that would just be mean.”

Me and Serenity shared a smile. Well, time to leave, and it wouldn't be soon enough.

Three gears stood in the middle of the picture, each ringed about a magical spark. Through the picture's centre a sword struck upwards, blue wings flying out from either side. It was a bit... fancy for my tastes. I preferred something I could sink my teeth into, like the NCA's five legged pony. This thing I was standing before was a symbol I couldn't remember even if I was a smart pony. Maybe that's why they felt the need to plaster the symbol every five meters inside the compound?

Outside the cell, stairs led to a large room, which I had to guess was for conferences. That room was long, with a huge table and many seats surrounding it. We were lucky; it was also completely empty. Turning away from the stupid-looking symbol, I strolled up and down the length of the table looking for something... anything. I was not much of a curious pony, but I found myself in the precarious position of possibly having useful information.

There was little-to-nothing to find, save for a single scrap of paper at the head of the table. With my usual weary sigh, I leaned over and read it, my words mouthing what was written out of habit. *“Meeting notes: We argued about how we always argued. Nothing was accomplished.”*

Elder Chunky Soup”

I was the paragon of finding useless crap. You know how in the stories, if somepony found a piece of paper lying on the ground it would always be a clue that turned out to be key in solving the puzzle... apparently, my luck was not so fabled.

“Well, Serenity, you know the way?” She nodded confidently under her brown cloak, the hood firmly over her head. There was exactly no reason for her to have stolen that thing, and frankly it looked silly, but being shrouded amused the filly, so I couldn't tell her no.

“It's this way!” she said, confidently trotting over to the far wall. Two doors flanked either side of the wall, and I had a feeling they both led to the same room. “Just gotta go through this an-”

The door slid open.

With a squeak, Serenity bolted back and found a perfect hiding spot behind Flare. The spark flare... gun thing... The spark pulse emitter (nailed it) was smooth in my mouth, my front teeth precariously holding onto the trigger button. Somepony walked through the door and I stepped forward with my very best glare. “Stand down.” I muffled before even getting a look at the pony.

He was hardly a threat: an Elderly pale red pony with only the barest wisps of grey mane clinging to his skull. He was wearing a blue and yellow robe that had the Steel Ranger symbol adorning the back, and he didn't seem at all surprised to see me. He walked forward just enough to let the door slide shut. “There was a time,” the ageing stallion said, his voice quivering, “when we had no need for cells or dungeons.” When he shook his head, the extra skin on his neck flapped. “I supposed you killed Curly then?”

"No." I said simply. "Though he's worse for wear... wait, I said stand down!" I got back into my fighting stance and glowered at the stallion.

"Or you'll hurt an old stallion... how chivalrous." Serenity giggled and peaked out from behind Flare. "Ah, Captain." He gave a mocking bow to the blue pegasus. "'You took longer than I expected... though perhaps you were biding your time?' Biding our... I glanced down at the pipbuck and realized just how late it was. Nearing midnight, so without a doubt most of the Steel Rangers would be asleep, which boded well. If only I'd actually planned it. "Oh and look, a foal you haven't murdered; there's a shock, indeed." Flare winced and drew himself back as Serenity looked on oblivious.

"Yeah," Flare said confidently. "Didn't expect to see you, Elder." They knew each other? Flare must have seen the look I gave the both of them "Ah, Hired Gun, this is Elder Chunky Soup, head of the Dise regiment of the Steel Rangers." Oh. I guess I should have expected that.

"Might be the last elder anywhere." He strode past me as if I wasn't even a threat. "First Red Eyes comes with his slaves to take our headquarters, then these Applejack Rangers split away, then the Enclave come flying in all high and mighty. We've lost contact with the north..." he sighed heavily. "I've drawn our forces back, and my Paladins mock me when they think I don't hear. Such is my burden: I must order a group of unruly children around, even as they scream and bicker. It is for the best."

"Whatever." Totally did not care.

"Such an attitude." The Elder smiled at Flare. "She is a keeper."

"Say that to her face, I dare you. So, Elder, I was surprised to hear you wanted me arrested. We've talked about Bitter Steel..."

"I do apologize, but I did not expect you or your squad to be anywhere near here. I can see you did not expect to either -- no, don't tell me. I'd rather not know what you're doing with a filly and a cyborg." I had a name. "It was necessary to placate my Paladins. No one wanted to stop our patrols. They said the public was warming up to us." He shook his wrinkly head. "They were wrong, but how am I to intrude on such a good delusion?"

"So you sent Curly Fries as our interrogator so we could escape?"

"No. I planned for you to be killed by him." It felt like a punch to the gut, and I knew nothing good could come of that. "Though," he sat on one of the chairs, "I don't plan to stop you, but if you get caught, you will die... and please don't kill anypony. Or *foals*." He stressed that word. "Especially foals." He turned his eyes over to Serenity, still half-hiding behind Flare. "Especially that foal."

"Why?" He raised an eyebrow. "Why let us go?"

"Because, after all these years, I can see a lot in a pony's eyes. More than most. And I got a good look at yours. You see... there is a darkness under Dise. Something black and squirming and begging to be let free." I felt my coat stick out on ends, and heard the sound of a wind whipping past my ear. "Looking at you... I see it. The blackness, can you feel it? It taints your very soul, but...", there was the slightest bit of a grin on his muzzle, "but you're strong. You interest me. Maybe you'll fight the poison that eats at the heart of the last city... or maybe not. My Paladins think I am too trusting, and I am inclined to believe

them. Still, here's your chance."

"Uh." I gave Flare and Serenity my 'get the fuck over here' glare before nodding at Chunky. "Thanks for... not... killing us I suppose. Or not trying that hard to kill us... or... thanks for whatever it is you did."

With my usual display of eloquence we left the conference room and entered into what appeared to be an auditorium. The door we entered was directly beside a small wooden stage and podium, and lengthwise down the long room were rows of benches. On the walls were the Steel Ranger emblem; a much larger one was painted directly behind the podium. Walking down the length of the room, Serenity took the lead, ready to cast her awesome magic.

"Well," I said slowly, "that went better than expected?"

"Who knows." Flare trotted along slowly beside me, his face a mask of... something. "Don't trust him much... met him a year after Bitter Steel on what was supposed to be a diplomacy mission. We talked privately and came to an understanding but... well, the meeting did not go well. Would be best not to trust Chunky..."

"Right," I said as we reached the far end of the auditorium and turned to the door on the left wall. Together, we snuck up to it and nudged it open so we could see through but hopefully not be noticed. The hallway on the other side was long and plain (only a few large screens on rickety stands adorning it) with two doors on the right side, and one on the left. It also had the unfortunate amenity of a Steel Ranger slowly patrolling the hall..

Serenity pointed with her hoof towards the one door on the left side. I had to guess that was where the stairs were. The pink filly nodded at me for half a second before I saw a spark of magic on her horn. Way across the hall one of the monitor stands shook slightly in pink magic, and toppled over with a resounding crash. Gritting my teeth, I pushed the door open as the Steel Ranger turned to investigate. At once we three scrambled to the left door, Serenity's magic hiding the sound of our hoofsteps.

The door slammed shut behind us and I let out the breath I was holding.

I was not made for sneaking and crouching. I really wanted my Subtlety back.

Sneaking along quietly, Serenity pointed me to the stairs. Apparently we were on sublevel four, which gave us a long way up before we got back to the outside where we belonged. Being underground was just not something I enjoyed. Traversing the stairs, the three of us did our best to be as quiet as possible without wasting Serenity's precious little energy. Though that was considerably more difficult for me as I had a hunk of metal for a leg.

Climbing the stairs in the dim light, I was happy to note that they seemed to go all the way to the surface level. That would cut down on my sneaking time, and make my life much easier (in retrospect I should have found this suspicious). I did so hate not having my guns and weapons and stuff. I liked shooting things, not sneaking around things. It felt cheap.

I walked confidently past the door on the landing to the third floor, just in time for it to slide open.

My heart stopped. I turned my head to see the flashlight eyes of a Steel Ranger staring at me. Beside me

I could feel Serenity and Flare stiffen up as we watched the pony. For a long time no one said anything as we stared down the ranger, waiting for him to attack, giving him the chance. Did he feel lucky? Did he think he could take us? Was he giving us a chance to surrender?

Then a horrible gasping, honking sound was emitted from the pony. He was snoring...

Was he really sleeping?

Seriously?

Quickly, Serenity zipped up and jumped, waving her hooves in front of the pony. Yup, he was totally sleeping. Facehoofing, I shook my head as my heart calmed down to normal speed. That had to be the stupidest thing I eve- The Steel Ranger twitched.

Serenity squeaked, and we ran to the next landing.

"Hired...", Serenity said as we neared the steps to the stairs' final platform, "are you my momma?"

Silence.

Flare coughed loudly, drawing my brain back out of it's shell. "No," I said slowly. By the look on her face I knew it was not the answer she wanted to hear. Squeezing my eyes shut for half a second, I steeled myself to her. It tore me up inside but I was not the pony she wanted as a mother. "Is this really th-"

"Hiiiiired," she whined, and I stopped on the landing halfway between the first and second floors. "Why not?" She was clearly determined to have this conversation now. Flare looked pleadingly at me, but I just shook my head.

"Serenity..." I leaned down to face her eyes to eye. "Please. We'll talk later... but right now we need to go. Okay?"

"Promise?" she asked, a pout on her lips.

"Promise." That seemed to satisfy her, as she smiled and jumped onto my back.

Slowly, we made our way to the first floor. The doorway led to a small hallway that changed quickly into a four-way split. The four hallways split off the centre, cutting the top floor into four sections. Of course, in the centre of the crossroads was a Steel Ranger standing firmly, his steel ass presently facing us. I knew in my gut that he wouldn't be asleep, so... fuck. I could have taken him out with my spark pulse emitter, but he would cry for help, and I couldn't leave Serenity there, making sure he didn't make a sound, as we searched for the exit.

Looking around, Serenity pointed to a small doorway a few feet away on our left. Biting my lip, I quickly ran through the door in magical silence, with Flare following right behind. Taking a deep breath at our new-found safety, I looked around the room that saved us...

To see rows of beds lining the room, all with sleeping ponies in brown robes. Swearing loudly, I clamped a hoof over my mouth. The magic pink glow was still surrounding us so my words weren't heard, but I didn't know how much longer the filly could keep it up. Turning around, I could see sweat beading down her face and dripping onto my back. On the far end of the room, on the right wall, was another door. Nodding confidently at Flare, I crouched as low as I could and inched forward.

Had it not been for Serenity's magic, my fast-beating heart would have woken up every Steel Ranger in the room. The walk was slow and gut wrenching. The beds were packed together so close, the space between barely had enough room for me. It did not help that they were also a tad small, meaning many ponies' legs stuck out into the aisle awkwardly. Flare went first and was waiting at the door on the right wall seconds later. Damn that fast pegasus.

My body stopped as I touched a pony's hoof. Ever so slowly, I turned my head to see the pony. She was a cute green pony with a tussled mane, and she was still sleeping peacefully. Thanking my lucky stars, I continued down the row. By the time I reached the end of the row I was sweating heavily, and I think my heart may have exploded. What I wouldn't have gave for the chance just to kick all their flanks and be done with it. Sneaking is stupid.

Flare nickered in magical silence as we opened the door.

Across the hall was another door, but more importantly at the end of the hallway to our right was a (third) door with the word, 'Exit' glowing above it. Freedom. Before moving towards the exit I turned my head towards the Steel Ranger. He was still stupidly staring the same way he had before. Grinning I started for the exit... until Serenity tugged at my mane.

I felt her clamber onto my head and saw a pink hoof stick out over my eye just into my field of vision. Why would she want to go into the room across the hall... because our stuff was there along with whatever else the Steel Rangers had scavenged. It occurred to me that Serenity had said earlier that she had explored this area, by herself, before finding us. She was a much better sneaky pony than I, so it was no wonder she found it. She probably knew the whole layout of the building...

Of course, that also meant she had been overtaxing her magic. That silence spell could not have been easy, especially now she that had to cast it over all of us.

I nodded and quickly sprinted through the door, hearing it slide shut behind me. There was a wicked grin on Flare's face as he caught sight of the room. Piles upon of piles of boxes and crates were stacked up throughout the storage room, all full to bursting with technology and supplies. I had heard that Steel Rangers stole technology and hoarded it, but I was not prepared for it when I saw it.

If only I knew how to use anything more complex than a gun.

After nodding to Serenity to turn her magic off, I followed Flare as he dug excitedly through one of the boxes. Inside there were strangely shaped metal boxes with wires and gem stones and... I'll be honest I'd no idea what he was looking at it. Given that Serenity didn't seem interested the only thing I could tell is that they weren't cybernetic parts.

Those boxes off in the corner, however, were cyber parts. I knew this because as soon as Serenity saw them she zipped off and dove in. Smiling, I trotted up behind her and watched her work through the crate.

Cyber leg, cyber leg, something that looked like a spine (that must have hurt), a cyber eye? Who would ever need a cyber eye? The concept just seemed silly to me.

Turning away, I remembered why we had come to this room in the first place. Somewhere, in this mess of dimly lit technology, our gear was stored. Lightly I poked Serenity's head. "Our stuff." She looked up at me, a mess of wires hanging from her mouth.

"Oh yeah!" She let go of whatever it was she had in her mouth and bounded off around a stack of rocket launchers (didn't seem safe, that). I waited for a second until I heard a muffled cry for me to come over. Yeah, it did in fact take me that long to realize the little filly wouldn't be able to carry all our stuff over.

I trotted to where she was, but stopped a few seconds later. Laying haphazardly on top of a pile of... something... was barding. Up 'til then, I'd gotten around wearing... well nothing but my skin and coat. Lifting it with my metal hoof, I studied the garment. The brown barding seemed just a bit worn, but it had a heft to it that told me it was well-reinforced. Its collar was high and stiff with small pockets lining it. Just enough room for a healing potion or two, and much easier than having to reach into my saddle bags. Moreover, it looked exactly my size, if a little tight.

After putting the barding, I looked down at myself and silently approved. It wasn't Steel Ranger armour, but I was getting shot way too much to not wear anything. I tested out one of the front pockets by putting the spark pulse emitter in it.

"Gun!" Serenity said, way too loud. I nudged my barding into a more comfortable position before following after her. It was going to take some getting used to, having something pressed against me at all times, but it was better than, you know, death.

"Serenity." I then said the silliest thing ever to a pony that could literally turn sound off. "Not so loud." She looked abashed for a second before pointing me to our supplies, lovingly heaped in a messy pile. From the looks of it, Serenity had managed to find everything, up to and including Subtlety and Bunker Buster. As well as a brand new saddle bag. "Oh." I poked at it. "For me?"

"Your last one got lost in the dark, remember?" Yeah... I remembered. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw a splash of red, but I didn't look. It was just a scar I had to carry with me. I allowed myself a shudder, then pushed the thoughts from my mind.

"Thanks." I said, slipping the saddle bags on my back. Then came Subtlety. Between the barding, bags, and gun, I felt almost as tied up as when I wore the dress. The dress that was still sitting in Flare's bags... Gulping, I tried to put Serenity's mind onto something else before she realized that fact.

Spotting a glimpse of pink in the pile of our stuff, I kicked at it. My pink shades flipped through the air majestically, and I tried to make them land on my nose. They did... only upside-down and off-kilter. While Serenity giggled loudly, I quickly fixed my glasses, just in time for Flare to come around the corner, hauling something in his mouth.

"Wha' I miss?" he mumbled between mouthfuls of electronics. I raised an eyebrow at him and shrugged. "Bomb stuff... gunna be good trust me," he said after spitting the crap on the ground. "Also!" He flapped his wings happily, and I noticed that the one was missing the hole it had gained in the tunnel. "Found a healing potion... only one, but c'mon, gotta fly." He flapped his wings a few times and lifted off the

ground... for a second until he veered strangely, slamming into a wall.

With an omph, he slid to the ground. "So," I said, watching him, "Rusty?" He smirked at me and got back to his feet. "Get dressed, quickly." Rolling his eyes, he nodded and did as I bade him. The lights flickered and I shuddered just a bit. We had stayed too long here, and been too loud. Still, I wanted to stay longer. This room had more than I could ever imagine; just another minute to steal and we would never want for food or protection.

"Thought I heard something." The metallic voice reverberated through the room and into my core.

I turned around and aimed Subtlety faster than I'd any right to. The Steel Ranger from the cross section of the floor was standing there, his metal eyes shining. "Don't move." I tried to warn him.

"Normally," the way his helmet was tilted it almost looked like he was grinning, "I make the thre-"

BANG

The bullet tore through his armoured leg in a splash of gore. With a cry of pain, the Ranger stumbled and fell, his helmet smacking against the floor with a thud.

Serenity was looking up at me, her eyes wide. "Hired, wh-" I lifted a hoof to quiet her down. The Ranger was injured, but he was alive. Elder Chunky Soup begged me to not kill, so I did not. He was, however, somewhat fuzzier on the subject of kneecaps.

"Not now." I lifted Serenity onto my back and made for the exit. My heart was pounding, but I was confident we would escape. With my gun and I together again, their whole army wouldn't have been able to stop me.

"Stop right there, crimina-"

Subtlety roared.

One of the two steel rangers guarding the base's facade fell, his leg bleeding and soaking the ground. The second was more proactive, firing rounds from his mounted machine gun at me. Most missed, but I felt one thunk into my barding, going through before sinking into my chest. Gritting my teeth through the pain I fired two shots.

The first tore the pony's gun from his back, sending scraps over the ground; the second hit the steel leg right above the hoof. Howling curses, she fell as well, her blood mixing in with her partner's. As we started to run, sirens wailed behind us.

"Flare. Re-learn to fly and get the fuck out of here!" We had made it all the way up the stairs into the entrance foyer before the alarm started to ring. When we left, I could have sworn I heard hoofsteps coming up the stairs. The two guards outside had taken too long to incapacitate, and I knew it wouldn't be long before we were caught.

"But I-" Flare started, his head inclining to his duel grenade launchers.

"FLARE!" He nodded briefly and let Serenity onto his back. As she clung tightly to his back, I tried to soothe her by petting her mane down. "Hold tight and be good. I won't be long." She nodded firmly, but I could see her sad grey eyes. She didn't think I was coming back.

The door burst open behind us. Looking back I saw metal ponies with glowing eyes, their guns flashing in the darkness of the night. Yeah, coming back did not seem likely. I smacked Flare on the flank with my metal hoof, and he shot off into the air. I could only pray to Luna the night would conceal him.

Maybe it would have before the sky had cleared. Looking up, I could see the blackness of the sky, but it was not total darkness. Between the clouds, thousands of lights danced like diamonds in the sky. They were bright, but compared to the huge crescent moon their light was paltry. Before the opening of the skies, Flare could have hidden, but Luna above seemed content to mock my efforts.

I stopped as he flew and looked down at my glowing amber pipbuck. Here came the choice. I smacked my dry lips together, wishing I had something to drink... or eat for the matter, but I pushed the feeling away. I was weak from hunger and foggy from thirst, so I wouldn't be able to outrun these guards. At the same time, I knew how to turn my pipbuck light off now so the thin darkness might be enough to hide me if I found a shady area quickly. *Survive*, that ever helpful voice in my head told me. Though... doing that may make them look to Flare's silhouette in the sky, and focus their efforts on him.

Was there ever any doubt?

With my pipbuck still glowing it's orangish light I flew through the night.

My hooves slammed against the concrete, each reverberating strike revealing my position to anypony with a brain.

Bullets zipped past me and faded into the night. Flare had gone left when he flew, so I ran right. I had to draw them away from Flare's flight path, not for long, but for long enough.

In front of me was a small hill with a steep incline I would never be able to climb quickly enough. The mound stretched out horizontally against my trajectory, and when I ran along side it, I was perpendicular to the ponies seeking to kill me. I ran fast but I was still a damn easy target running sideways.

A shot clanged off my metal leg, while another embedded itself into the ground in front of me. I skidded to a stop and tried to turn, only for a bullet to stream past my eyes.

I pivoted and faced my attackers. Five of them with their eyes glowing, but they didn't shoot at me. There was a clicking and a shouted warning for me. Five metal ponies against one cybermare.

My stomach growled in protest, and my throat begged for water. I shook a little on my hooves. This was too much. Too much running, too much hiding. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes. Fuck, what I wouldn't do for a drink. I promised to return to Serenity, dammit; I couldn't get caught now. I had barely made it any distance at all and now I was trapped. Was this the best I could do?

My eyes shot open, glaring with hatred. No. Fuck them.

I charged, shouting defiance from my parched throat.

A few stepped back as I kicked up dirt. No, they wouldn't expect this. All I could hear was the sound of Subtlety roaring like midnight thunder. Bullets zipped past me, into me, but I kept running and firing. I dimly felt my battle-saddle reloading and I started firing again, and again.

I reached them, bloody and hurt. The first I kicked in the face, sending their head back. My body moved faster as if possessed by some demon, bucking the pony in the neck.

There was a shout of confusion as the pony fell. Not from me, I was euphoric. I ducked a clumsy hoof strike by one pony, and laid down kicks when he stood confused. Subtlety blared-point blank into ponies' legs. Another tried jumping from behind me. I felt their cold weight press against me, pinning me down.

So I bucked them the fuck off. The thrill of the fight consumed me and blinded me to all else.

I don't know how long I fought the five metal giants, I just know that when all was said and done I faced the last at fifty paces.

One of her flashlight eyes glowed while the other was shattered. Had I done that? I... I couldn't remember. All around me four ponies groaned and gasped in pain. None of them dead though... I avoided killing... I promised Chunky Soup and, dammit... it was a promise.

The battle fell from me, and I suddenly felt so very tired. My stomach was complaining its emptiness, and my body was on fire from a dozen different wounds. Subtlety felt like the weight of the world on my back, and I could almost hear my spine cracking under the strain. Fatigue washed over me, and I wanted nothing more than to sleep.

"Give up... and... I'll spare you," the mare gasped under her armour. She sounded tired, and maybe a little impressed. I bit into my bridle, but Subtlety clicked empty. Well... fuck.

"Uh..." I shook the idea out of my head. What part of return to Serenity and don't kill anypony didn't I understand? I was not a clever pony (I'd just charged five steel rangers...) but I wasn't going to break a promise. "Could you?" I said between laboured breaths that stung my chest. "I promised... not to kill anypony."

She laughed. "Even now you persist... you're... impressive."

"Thanks." I intoned, shifting my back leg back a bit. I felt the collar of my barding sway under my unsteady movement, and something inside the pocket hit against my neck.

Wait.

I charged again!

My hooves beat into the dirt in an unsteady stride. Trails of blood followed my hoofprints in the dirt, but I kept running. She jerked in surprise and opened fire. Blood splashed over my face as my ear exploded, but I didn't feel it. The thrill came back. I was deaf to everything else. Time seemed to slow as I jumped.

Bullets flashed past me. I reached into the pocket on my barding.

And pulled out the spark pulse emitter.

That's right. I fucking forgot about the Steel Ranger-slaying weapon in a battle with five Steel Rangers!

I was not a clever pony.

I was a fighting pony, though. I landed on top of the poor mare. There was a flash of green energy that engulfed her, glowing in the night like balefire.

I stood over her. "Fuck," she said, unable to move.

I won. I beat them... I...

Collapsed.

Blood pooled around me. I was lying in a lake. Blinking, the pool seemed to edge slowly outwards before getting sucked into the dirt. Beside me I saw the steel ranger struggling with her armour. Things seemed fuzzy, and half-remembered after that. I may have lapped at the blood to parch my thirsty throat, but I... don't remember. Not long after I felt consciousness fade. A blackness consumed me, where there were no stars nor moon to light my way.

"Over here..."

Somepony said. The voice was fuzzled and obscure.

"I see her... the light... look."

My eyes fluttered open. Everything was so dark I could barely see. The steel pony... where... she was supposed to be there.

"Are you okay?!"

No, she wasn't there... I saw her armour. It was spread all around, scrapped.

Suddenly I was looking in the face of a green unicorn. Wisps of red mane fell over his face. He was pretty. So pretty. Then again, everything looked pretty. Like the stars behind his head, and the way his glasses sparkled. So pretty.

"She lost a lot of blood!" Serenity's voice. Yes I knew it. "Momma needs a healing potion." I saw her face now. Sad grey eyes. They were always so sad. "Healing potions. Please. However many you have."

Something was shoved into my mouth. It tasted bitter, and that meant healthy. How did I know what oranges tasted like?

Wounds knitted together, making me sick to my stomach. I hated that feeling. I would have puked had I eaten anything. Still, my strength was coming back. Slowly.

Things became clearer. Eight ponies surrounded me. Serenity and Flare were two, as well as that green stallion with the straight red hair. The others were strange faces wearing NCA uniforms. Where did they get those... where. My mind cleared, and slowly ponies helped me to my feet.

"Five..." I said slowly. "There were..." I looked around, seeing a single Steel Ranger pony on the ground... dead. There were pieces of armour everywhere but no other ponies. Blood and bullet casings but where... a pony helping me up twitched, sending pain firing up my flank. "Where did they..."

"We saw four steel rangers limping back to their camp," the green pony with the red mane said, his voice smooth and confident. "I'm impressed." He leaned in far too close, and I tried to lift a hoof to strike him but it just sort of, didn't move. Looking down I could dimly see that somepony had removed my legs power source. "The Steel Rangers were too. Left you here. Though maybe they were too weak to drag you. Would explain why they bandaged your wounds."

My head lowered down to Serenity, who smiled hopefully up at me. "Who the fuck is he?"

"High Stakes." He bowed gracefully. "I am a representative or Mr. House."

"Mr. Stakes," one of the NCA ponies helping me up said, "has vouched that you killed Roy Mustang, on the word of Mr. House himself." The pony looked serious under his helmet.

"Yeah... don't go spreading it around." So Starscream told House, who told High Stakes. My head hurt.

"Good. The NCA awards your service, and will keep your secrecy." He smiled. "You're set to be a very rich mare."

I looked forlornly to where the Steel Ranger headquarters stood. "I'd rather be a living mare."

High Stakes chuckled. "Worry not, Steel Rangers won't attack any NCA personnel so close to the Farm." To the farm... yes it was just over the hill... which is where Flare went. Which is where House sent High Stakes to find me, because it was the closest NCA base. Which is why the Steel Rangers won't attack, because they'd be wiped out. Everything made so much sense it hurt my head.

"You." I pushed the ponies away from me.

"I'd take a step back about now, Stakes," Flare nickered, spinning so he was floating upside down. Somehow I knew he missed that. "She bites."

"Fuck off, Flare." I shook my head as the healing potions did their work. I wasn't back to full health, and I was sure I'd enough bullets inside of me to severely piss off a metal detector, but I was not dying. "High... what does House want?"

"He has a jo-"

"I'll take it." Serenity giggled softly, off to my side, and Flare nickered. The NCA ponies and High Stakes

shared a number of confused looks before High Stakes opened his mouth. "I said." I pre-interrupted. "I'd take it."

I couldn't tell if High Stakes was suppressing a laugh or looking at me like I was an idiot. Maybe both. "Is she for real?" he asked nopony, and everypony. Flare nodded affirmative. "Right. Because this makes perfect sense." He shook his head. "Fine. You're hired. First, we need to get to the Snake and travel up it."

"Woah. A snake? Like a big one." A huge mutated snake we had to travel up! Or maybe many small snakes and we had to travel up through its territory. Either way really cool.

"Hired...", Serenity tugged on the barding that had probably saved my life, "the Snake is a river."

Please don't laugh at me. Please don't laugh at me. I looked around and nopony laughed... well except for Flare but he hardly counted.

"Right." I started walking. At least, I started walking after Serenity deftly replaced my leg's power supply. "Lead the way."

"Hired Gun," High Stakes smooth voice dances through the moon light illuminated darkness. "You should not stress yourself. You are--"

"Fuck that." I looked up and smiled at Luna. The night was young and so was I, but neither would last forever, so there was no time for delay. "Let's go. To this river. I'll be fine." The ponies all looked at me like I'd lost my mind. I had just fought five Steel Rangers in bloody stupid combat, and here I was leading the Celestia knows how long walk. Maybe I was crazy, but I was alive. I shouldn't have been, but there is something to be said for being a big, tough pony.

Do you know what a river is?

See, that's a funny question. I had assumed I knew what a river was because I'd heard of them. Some sort of waterway, but it never really occurred to me how large they could be. Standing on the darkened banks of the river and looking forward I could not even see the other side, even with the riverboat's lights shining.

Apparently, a boat was a form of transportation you used on the river. It looked to me like a giant bulky house. It seemed to lay flat on the water, but I was assured there was a good portion sunken under the water. The main deck we climbed onto had a small area around the centre building for which to walk, as well as a sizable deck on the front, but the majority of the area was taken up by the building. Looking up I could see it was two stories high, but given the small topmost building, it seemed the top was the boathouse. That is to say, the place where they steered the ship. Looking over the back half of the ship, I could see a long, large, tube-like wooden structure sticking out. It wasn't solid, but instead had wooden panels going from the rim into the centre. Or something, having never seen anything like that before I am really not sure if my explanation is appropriate or correct. Well, fuck it, I tried.

"The Snake is slow," the stallion said. He was a tiny orange pony with a long grey mane that almost touched the ground. Scrunching up his face as if my questioning his boat's sturdiness was an insult, he

said, "Even with the rains. She won't tip. Mah colts treat her well, and missus cooks a fine meal. Best boat on the river what isn't full of pirates." He nodded firmly. "You in or...?"

"Five hundred caps..." I repeated the price slowly.

I turned to my companions.

The five NCA ponies had escorted us all the way to the Snake (thankfully only about four miles away) to dissuade Steel Rangers from pursuing. The green pony who worked for Mr. House was with us. And of course my two companions. A lovely travelling company if I hadn't hurt so much. Even with all the healing potions they pumped into me, I still felt weak as a kitten, and my entire body ached in pain with each movement. At one point on the trail, I had needed a shot of Med-X just to continue.

Serenity blinked sleep out of her eyes and yawned loudly, though I could see she tried to hide it.

The NCA had given me the six thousand caps for killing Roy while we walked. They were very careful to give it to me when the light was the darkest, and nopony was around. "Yeah." I said to the boat pony. "Five hundred." Caps were exchanged, and fake smiles were given.

"Your names?" The pony asked pleasantly. "I am Red Sky."

"Hired Gun." I nodded, my head still pounding from the fight. I pointed to my companions. "Flare. Serenity. And..." That pony was coming with us... what was his name. I was sure he told me, but my mind was fuzzy and... "High Stakes." I said eventually.

"Welcome aboard. Don't shoot nopony." Now what would give him that impression... other than Subtlety hanging heavy on my back. "Two rooms upstairs, mares and stallions if you please, or whatever you want." Mares and stallions sounded about right. "You lot look tired, and I don't want anypony saying I kept the NCA waiting. We push off in the mornin'; we'll explain the rest then."

"Okay." I turned to Serenity, who was rubbing her eye with her hoof. "Okay, off to bed with you."

"But." Without a second's warning her eyes went big and round, verging on tears. "But I wanna stay up with you." Her lower lip quivered just enough to make my heart pang with guilt. "I'm not sleepy." On cosmic cue she started yawning. When her pout slid back into place, I felt the slight guilt she forced on me melt away. I gave her a stern look to bite back further protests. "Fine... but you promised we'd talk..."

Crap.

"Flare, Stakes. Do whatever it is you do. Serenity is going to bed, I'll be down soon." Flare smirked and trotted around the boat to the front deck, and High Stakes followed for some reason. After nodding my thanks to the NCA ponies, I turned back to Serenity. "Okay. Talk, then bed." She nodded happily and I rolled my eyes. "March then." With a smirk she was off.

I hung back as she magicked the door to the main building open. After a brief stretch of my painful muscles, I followed after her. The inside of the boat was lit with candles through the main hall, all the way to the stairs, along them, and into our room. I was pleasantly surprised to find our room was lit too. The smoke from the candles filled the room, but it was a pleasant smell. Overall, it was nice, I suppose. Very

clean, but with only two stiff-looking beds for comfort.

"Serenity." I started to say, but I was cut off.

"Why can't you be my momma?!" she said, almost as soon as I shut the door.

"Because. I'm not."

"So?" She sat on the floor looking stubbornly at me. "I rescued you, you owe me." She did at that, but that was a big request. I don't think she truly understood how big.

"You did good." Still, I shook my head. "But you don't want me as a mother."

"I'm pretty sure I do."

"Listen, Serenity." I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible. The subject of motherhood made my already fucked-up body twist in agony. It was just... a bad idea for so many reasons. "I'm a bad pony... okay. For Celestia's sake, I almost sold you when we met."

"No," she squeaked, staring solemnly at the floor under her hood. "Y-you listen... I... you don't understand, Hired... you. I-I was in The Watchers all my life, it was dull and boring and all, nopony cared for me, not really. They gave me food and shelter, and teachings, but nopony there cared. Even still, I just wanted to help ponies, then one day, for the first time, they let me go on a caravan! I was gonna help ponies!" I sat on the bed and watched the filly. She spoke with such emotion, I could almost feel it myself. "B-but they came... the slavers." She sniffled. "Ponies died around me.... me and the other foals couldn't do anything. You... you're always so big and strong... I wish I was... all I could do was cry and wet myself as they tied us up and made us walk. We walked for days and days until my hooves were bloody... I was strong. I was, really. I helped the other foals... when we stopped I treated their injuries... One night, when I thought I was going to die of exhaustion, there were gun shots...

"I thought we were saved... I was so happy." She shook tears out of her eyes. "Watchers came back... they found us, I thought. Only... it was just *her*." She made the word her own personal curse. I had no idea she could be so venomous. "She locked us up, too. All of us in her store... I could hear voices and I screamed and cried until I ran out of tears, but they never heard. The ponies upstairs ignored us. Eventually all of the foals were sold... but me. I was next... last... I... had given up hope. Nothing mattered. When you came down and rescued me I knew you were just another slaver... I...

"I was right..."

"It didn't matter, I could have ran, but what was the point? So I followed... I followed you to Silver Bullet and did what you said. I knew my fate..." She scrunched up her muzzle. "Then... he said where he was gunna sell me too. Your face, it was... like a mix of rage and hate and pity, and you shot him. You were outnumbered four to one and you shot him! For me!" Her eyes went wide at the thought, hardly believing it herself. "You... you saved me. For no reason... I didn't understand. Then you went to the stable, and I got my stupid foal head all drowned... and you saved me again..."

"You're the only pony who ever did that. You... you saved me against stupidly impossible odds." She let her hood fall back, and to my shock, she was crying. "You saved me. You... you care. You're the best

momma cause you care... you care about me." What the hell happened to this filly? Had she had such a shitty life that anypony showing her an iota of kindness was a thing of beauty to be cherished forever.

I wrapped my hooves around her and let her cry. What was I to say? How could I tell her no after that? She needed somepony to care for her, care about her, to tell her she did good, to punish her when she misbehaved. But how could it be me? I couldn't take on that responsibility again. I was a stupid pony, prone to running into impossible situations and getting fucked up. I could barely keep myself alive and hale. How could I be expected to help a filly too? I couldn't. I was a failure in everything I did. How could I drag her down with me?

Looking down at her tiny body sobbing tears into my chest, I realized I couldn't say no.

My whole body was sore. Pain lanced through me at each small movement, and my head was hit with a sudden blinding pain.

I couldn't tell her no. But I couldn't tell myself yes.

Eventually, Serenity stopped crying and used my coat to dry her tears. Slowly and timidly she looked up at me. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her mane was a frizzled mess, but she smiled ever so lightly. "I..." I tried to speak but no words came out. What was I supposed to chose?! If I told her no, I would break her heart, and I couldn't bear to see her cry again. If I told her no, I would fail her like I had failed every other pony I tried to protect.

Fuck.

"I..." Life is not simple. I tried so hard to treat life like a fight. If you *survive*, you win, but in this case... sometimes life gives you a choice and both answers are wrong. How are you supposed to work with that? I am not a clever pony, I can't deal with vagueness. I can't do responsibility. I was not a good pony, I was not a smart pony, I was not a... not a mother. My mind was swimming, but I had no idea. What was I supposed to do? Give her disappointment now, or later?

I wanted to cry, drink, and kick something. But none of those things held my answer.

"I need to think about it."

That saddened her, I could see. How could it not? I brushed her mane back with my hoof and sighed a bit. "It's a big thing... I need to think. Please." Reluctantly she nodded.

"You'd make the best momma."

No, that I would not.

"Maybe." I lied through my teeth. Then I patted her on the back. "Now go to bed." Her pout was ineffective as I pointed her toward the bed.

With a grumble and a yawn she jumped onto the bed. Tucking her in, she continued to be grumpy, but I knew as soon as I blew the candles out, she'd be asleep. "G'night," I said softly.

"Night, mommy."

The lights were blown out, and I walked down the stairs and into the night.

The wind was chill and crisp and smelled of water and life. On the front deck I could see High Stakes and Flare chatting. I trusted Mr. House's employee little to none, but as long as he kept Flare occupied I was happy. I walked the other way, to the rear of the ship, and sat looking up at the sky.

The vague shape of Luna was half hidden behind the ever shifting clouds. They hadn't gone away fully, but there were less, and most moved and shifted as if blown away. Celestia and Luna had returned, but life still wasn't rainbows and sunshine. Life was even more confusing than it had been, but there in the sky there was still hope. There was nothing I could say to Serenity without breaking her heart eventually, and there was nothing I could do to stop the wasteland from trying to tear me down.

But that's life right? Problems came and went, and even as they got resolved, more show up to take their place. There was time to change, to fight back, to *survive*. Luna came out from the cloud layer, her light shining down on me and fluttering over the still river water. Things weren't so bad. I had a leg to stand on, friends of a sort, a filly who looked up to me... and a job on the horizon.

It was time to move forward, and I would do it with the sun on my back.

That's not so bad, is it?

Level Up!

New Perk: Intense Training Level 2: Actually paying attention to your surroundings and companions has finally paid off. +1 to Perception.

Skill Note: Sneak 50

((A/N: Once again I need to give my thanks to Kkat for creating this world and doing those awesome things she does. As well as big thanks to theBSDude [without whom I'd be dwindling in obscurity], Julep, and ErrantIndy. All three help make this thing here readable, so give them your praise.))

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