

Beneath The Surface

"The most massive characters are seared with scars."

"We sell guns and gun accessories."

Robots were not the best for conversations, less so those that hide behind bulletproof glass. They were also terrible barterers! all their weapons had a set price that I was unable to talk down, even with all my and Serenity's charm.

The robot on the other side was little more than a screen hanging off the ceiling of its booth with various long, spindly arms that waved around uncomfortably. I could just imagine that one of those things could crush the skull of a would-be thief as easily as a pony could crush eggshells, so robbery was out of the question. Reluctantly, I placed my caps on the counter and watched as the robot slid them to his side of the glass and slid my overpriced .308 rounds to me. While I was still fairly wealthy (if you asked me), it just hurt parting with so much money for so little ammo. Though after how well grenades served me in the past, I made sure to pick up a bushel with no care to the cost.

"Thank you for your patronage." Patrowhat?

"Can I have a gun?" Serenity was resting her forelegs on the counter so she could see into the shop. Peering down at the little filly, I gave her five seconds to realize how stupid that statement was before answering.

"No."

"Why not?" Really? Have I mentioned I hate children?

"Because," I said trying out my 'caring matron' voice; though judging by her face it didn't work, "You haven't been trained. The smallest mistake can kill." Not to mention giving a mentally-scarred filly a gun was just a stupid idea. Yeah I'm an idiot, but I knew guns and when ponies shouldn't be carrying them.

"Commooon. You need a second gunner! Back up! I'm the best backup... Ever!" The little pink filly literally bounced as she bragged.

"I'm sure." How could I not roll my eyes at that? "Maybe, if we find a gun range, and I can see your skills." She beamed like the sun. However, I still had no intention what so ever of giving her anything even close to a gun.

"Haha! Watch out Wasteland; Serenity is coming." For catch phrases I'd give that a three out of five, plus some bonus points for actually saying it out loud. Now for any other pony, I would kindly point out that in a few hours we'd be (presumably) safe behind the massive walls of Dise and wouldn't have much need for guns, but I had to let Serenity have her delusions. Sometimes in the Wasteland that's all you really had.

Well, that went depressing in a hurry.

I backed up from the booth with my wallet emptier but my guns fuller. All in all, it was not such a bad trade. Looking up past the small armoury, I could see the massive grey wall of Dise looking not nearly as impressive as from a distance. What I'd thought was a massive slab of concrete was, in fact, a loosely held together jumble of wood, stone, brick, and metal that looked ready to fall apart at any second. Atop its ramparts, if I squinted, I could barely make out the signs of ponies patrolling, and for a split second I thought I saw the glint of a scope pointed at me.

Stepping back, I surveyed our options. Getting in Dise was not going to be easy. Because, while from a distance, the main entrance looked like a straight walk, the huge grey ruins of Old Dise stood in the way, most of which was actually inhabited. Just to get into the ruins, before even the city proper, you had to pass a NCA checkpoint, and somehow I figured that wouldn't be the only obstacle into the city. As I looked at the buildings that towered over the massive makeshift wall, I couldn't blame them for wanting to keep the city safe. Every

single pony for miles around could see the city, and I was sure every one of them wanted a piece of it.

Me included, if I must be honest.

“Do you think they'll let us in?” Serenity chirped in, breaking my trance.

“Uh,” I shook my head and started onwards to the NCA Guard post literally meters away. Like seemingly all of its kind, the guard post was surrounded by a chain-link fence lined with barbwire. The rest of the inhabited ruins made due with small walls consisting of train cars, sheets of metal, and, most jarringly, huge metal spikes. Predictably, I chose to take my chances with NCA questioning. Very brave of me, I know.

The Guard stopped me, “State your business in Parasite Mound.”

Parasite what now? Of all the names I've ever heard for towns that was by far the worst. The NCA trooper in his fancy blue uniform and faceless mask managed to glower none the less. An impressive feat, matched only by my not giving a fuck what some schmuck in blue thought.

“Sex, Drugs, Rock And Rolls.” It was the title of a book Wildfire loved in Marefort, and it was more than enough to send Serenity into a giggling fit. Mission accomplished. The NCA troop just continued to glower for a second before turning his head towards the small guard posts at his back.

“This her?” he called out. It was at that point, I became acutely aware of the fact several troopers had positioned themselves around the check point, and all of them had their weapons pointed at me. My shoulder couldn't have burned more if Celestia herself put the sun onto it. Gulping, I turned to the guard station as the door opened with a smash. Pushing Serenity behind me with my back leg, I lowered my body and readied my weapon.

“Took you long enough!” A gravelly voiced barked from beyond the door, and I instantly let go of the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. The burning subsided as a certain ghoulish strolled out of the office building as easy as you please. “Kick me outta my town, and then you follow me. You're not going to kick the NCA out of here, if that is what you're planning.”

“Not less someone pays me.”

“You're bold; I'll give you that. Do you have any idea what you're doing?” Not a clue. The rough idea was for me to barge into The Watchers, deposit Serenity into their care, find out why Dr. Morowynd wanted me to go with him. After that, my plans consisted mostly of whiskey and trying to find work. “You want into my town?”

I took a good hard look at the grey unicorn with his molted skin, and dead eyes. Then I turned my head to the other side of the checkpoint at a place called Parasite Mound. It certainly fit its namesake with grey buildings half torn down by war and half by age; piling atop each other like a great concrete hill. Skinny ponies darted back and forth between half-destroyed streets and newly-formed alleys, scavenging and sometimes fighting for salvage. It was a stupid name, but I could not think of a single place more apt to it, and from what I heard it was also the easiest way into the city.

“Yes.” I answered.

“You can't walk into a place like this like you walked into Timber. Ponies here have rules, and they have rulers, and if you don't know both, you'll be dead or dying. Worse yet your daughter-”

“She's not my daughter.”

Serenity pouted behind me.

“Whatever. Fact is, she'll be dead too unless you know the rules.” He smirked and stepped back waving a hoof at his office. “I'll tell you who rules and by what rules fo-”

"For a price." I finished. Yeah, I'm pretty stupid, always have been, but eventually you figure out how the Wasteland works.

"... these disturbing reports have been verified by numerous refugees from the North. If you're just joining us now," Lucky snapped on the radio in his office as I took my seat on a pillow across from his desk. *"The reports have been verified that a huge explosion reminiscent of a Balefire bomb has gone off in the heart of Equestria. What more, the elusive Enclave have been seen outside of their clouds for the first time... ever. What this means for Dise, and our very own Enclave Remnants here in Dise remains to be seen. We'll be reporting back with more news, as it becomes available,"*

"Distressing," Lucky said shaking his head at the radio, "Huddled masses have been coming through the northern passes in numbers unseen. Trying to escape whatever terror the Equestrian Wasteland has to offer, and it has always offered a lot. Back before the war, Equestria was always larger, did you know? Caledonia was what this land was called, and for reasons no pony could remember. It managed to pay lip service to Celestia without becoming a state of her nation despite being several degrees smaller in population due to what was once a sizable desert. Now, what was once Caledonia is the New Caledonia Alliance, and we have outgrown our former masters. Now, they seek our guidance and our power as we once sought theirs, and I have half a mind not to give it to them." His body writhed as he spoke, muscles tensing visibly where the skin had flaked away on his neck.

"You talk like you were there." Right, a ghoul. Of course he was.

"I was." Things were starting to make sense. "I saw the apocalypse, and it saw me. When I close my eyes I see the green flames licking the sky, and felt myself slowly wither and die as the company your ancestors built, Stable-Tec," he managed to make the name a curse, "poisoned me and my family out of fucking curiosity. Then I, dead, choose to flip off death and continue to live. Rebuild. I helped turn Eye Glow from a graveyard to a city, I helped form the Alliance of the five cities."

"So? Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to listen to the radio and understand what's at stake. We built up the world from the brink of death, and now Equestria is coming here to kill it again. They'll want food. They'll want blankets. They'll want water and supplies and they'll want it for free or they'll turn raider." he leaned in glaring at me, "They always do. Equestrians. Like you."

"I'm paying you for information, not history." Couldn't ponies even rant at the proper times anymore.

"But I like history..." Serenity complained.

"Fine," Lucky said ignoring the plea of the filly, "What do you want to know?"

"How do I get into the city?"

"Three ways." He smirked at me in an entirely uncomfortable manner, "One, you have a passport, either by being issued one by the NCA or Dise indicating you a resident of either or forging a fake one. Two, you prove you're a tourist with more than five thousand caps. Three, you provide proof you have a job waiting for you on the inside." As far as I could see, all those options were out of my reach. How very helpful.

"What should I expect inside Parasite Mound?"

"Violence," He said a bit too calmly, "It's not NCA territory, though we've agree to help guard it. A lot of ponies desperate to get into the city live there, some more than others."

"Do you have anything useful to say?"

“Keep your leg on.” He chuckled a bit. “From what I've seen of your 'habits', you'll fight a Hellhound for the right price, and here that's going to get you or your filly hurt.” he stopped tapping at his desk. “That goes for here as well as Dise. This is not the Wasteland where the biggest pony is top dog. Here, if you overstep or take the wrong job, you'll end up in an alley.”

“So I paid you for a warning?” I already regretted going to this idiot pony for help. Two hundred years old and was unable to give me a solid piece of advice. With a raspy sigh, he magically levitated a piece of paper across the desk to me. Ignoring the pain in my shoulder, I leaned over the mahogany desk. On it was a name and an address.

“We've been investigating a gun shop owner named Deadhead for suspicion of creating fake NCA passports. As it stands, we are several days before being able to convince 'The Finishers' to allow us to arrest him.” He shrugged his shoulder. “From the way I hear it his fakes are good, but expensive.”

I never did find out if his information was worth the caps I spent, as Deadhead wasn't at his shop when I'd gone calling, or even why Lucky needed the caps bad enough to charge for such information. Maybe it was supposed to be of those “life lessons” I have heard so much about. Everything comes with a price, yadda yadda, something about the soul. You know the usual tripe mothers and old mares push down the throats of fillies and colts to try and get them to go to bed. Some ponies really took to that sort of thing.

Parasite Mound (can we stop just for one more second for me to say how much I hate that name?) was mostly what I'd expected from the name: a teeming cesspit of violence and debauchery cleverly disguised as a cesspit of violence and debauchery. You'll notice it's not actually as crowded as it appears. Certain streets were filled with half-flanked stands of questionable meat and supplies while other streets managed to be completely empty, save for a hobo or drug addict sleeping by a derelict building. Rightfully so, I kept Serenity close at all times and forbade her from wandering.

If it were not for the locals, the town actually would have been amazing. At least to me. Tall stone buildings, some even up to five stories, towered on all sides in front of cracked stone streets. Steel poles rose from the ground, and their tips suggested they once held lamps to light the street even at night. They were long broken though, and the buildings had mostly turned into shells of their former self by war, weather, and lack of repairs. So what could have been an impressive town across the Wasteland turned into the refuse dump of Dise.

In front of us, however, was the final gate. The last door to Dise. Not an hour after leaving Lucky, I had happened upon it and stood under it, breathless. It had been a week or more since I woke up in Bridle Hope with a new leg and a new name. So many adventures and battles had led me to this place, but as I stood before it, I had no idea why. It was a mammoth of metal, wood, and, surprisingly enough, thick black paint, and as I looked at it I realized how little clue I actually had. My plan was to somehow get through this gate, find the Watchers, do something, and then make a profit.

The robots guarding the gate didn't help my sudden feelings of insecurity. They were vaguely pony-like in the way a flower is treelike. They were stout torso like boxes with rounded edges lacking any pretence of legs and instead were balanced by two wheels: one in the front, another in the back. Rather than a head, a stand with a monitor served: showing the static face of an annoyed pony with a rather fancy helmet. Off the back of the machine, where a tail should have been, was a beeping red antenna. Most distressingly were panels etched into the surface of the pony, that, when threatened opened an array of huge automatic machine guns. When a small colt tried to make a beeline to the gate, I saw with my own eyes the power of said guns.

Behind me, Serenity wailed.

I took one last look at the bloody colt, his blue body still twitching, and at the five “Ponitrons” guarding the gate before I turned and hefted Serenity onto my back. Growling a bit under my breath, I took a left turn down an empty alleyway and skid to an abrupt spot. Helping Serenity to the hard concrete, I gave her room as she curled

into a ball sobbing. I knew she had seen death before, but that of someone so young seemed to have hit her harder than I expected. Knowing this, I should have tried to comfort her, but when I opened my mouth my tongue tied itself into knots. Words refused to come just as they had refused before.

Without words, what else could I do but take a step back and watch? She sobbed deeply, the tufts of her matted yellow and red mane bobbed with her. She was such a small little thing to hold so much sadness. Even if she tried to hide it, her mask was cracked and easy to see through. Stepping forward, I searched for something to say.

“Give me all your caps, an’ no pony’ll get hurt.”

Turning, my glare stiffened at the site of a skinny-looking grey earth pony with a knife in his muzzle. Was he really going to threaten me? I had to wonder how much he was going to curse his timing as I reared out, my metal hoof connecting with a crack.

Toppling to the ground, he rolled a few feet before halting. A great gash tore through his cheek, and blood was beginning to pool around his head, until he lifted it that is. His grey face was painted red; his weapon nowhere to be found. Strolling casually up to him, I began my usual ‘retreat and live’ spiel when his white eyes found me: burning with hatred. Before I could blink, pain flared up my chest where he bucked me. Backing up I wheezed as my sight grew blurry.

Not good.

Guessing the second kick was coming, I lifted my metal leg in defence. My metal leg thudded and shook violently as my sight straightened itself. Ducking a third kick, I drove my head between his forelegs. Lifting my head, I tossed him off his feet. Hearing his body slam against concrete, I decided he didn’t deserve my mercy. Lifting my metal hoof, I was ready to end it.

“Vat iz this?” My head snapped to the alley entrance.

Please believe that what I saw is true, no matter how ridiculous it sounds. Before me stood five matching ponies of varying races. Their manes were a uniform white, save for two whose roots were starting to show, while over their eyes they wore bright pink goggles. Instead of protective barding, or anything sensible like that, they had on gaudy black, white, and pink striped dresses complete with matching pink ascot. They strutted towards me with such arrogance I almost forgot I was in the middle of the fight.

Oh, and for some reason one of the ponies was blaring background music.

“I said, vat iz this?”

I blinked as the leader sauntered over to me leaving her posse behind. Her dull blue coat seemed slick with sweat but it looked to bother her none. “Tried to rob me.” I said plainly, my raised hoof not leaving its place above the grey pony’s head. Below it, I could see him squirming and trying to protect himself from a blow which never came.

“Iz that so?”

How was it possible to walk with your rump up in the air like that? These strange dress-wearing ponies must have been some sort of magical cult. Or insane. Or both. I was torn between possibilities as she leaned down and sniffed.

“Hmph. Zis is not ze sort of pony ve vant in our city. Girls, dispose of him.” I could not place the accent as it was like nothing I’d ever heard, or wanted to hear. The leader raised her hoof to her chest, “I G-”

“Wait.” The pony stopped and glared at me through her thick goggles. Around me her “gang” grabbed the ragged body of my mugger and dragged him away. Clearly, they cared little for the well-being of their leader if they left

her alone with me. "What the fuck?" I enquired as politely as I could.

"Do not tell me you have no heard of ze great Photo Finish. Photo Finish is vat all ponies aspire to be," Oh goddess, I hope not. Shaking my head, I waited for her to continue. "Sigh."

Did she just say the word 'sigh?'

I never had the chance to ask as she quickly continued, her outrageous accent forgotten, "Photo Finish was the most glamorous pony before the war. She had set up a fashion company in Dise and off' instructed students in the ways of fashion." She looked just a bit frustrated with me. " When my mother found her old studio she devoted her life to bringing back her style to the world. Ponies lost their sense of civility, she said, and by bringing back fashion we can bring back all the socialization that is inherent in it." She finished her obviously rehearsed speech before her accent returned, "Does zat satisfy you?"

"Yes." I said as blankly as I could, my mind still trying to understand what I was just told.

Staring for a second, she brought a hoof to her chest, "I go!" And galloped off the way she came.

Turning around I saw Serenity staring at me, her grey eyes huge in shock. "W-What," She stuttered slightly. "What just happened?"

"Nope."

You had got to be kidding me.

"Why?" I said, making my voice as flat as possible as my eyes scanned the store. It was disgusting to look at. Piles of guns, barely cared for, were strewn haphazardly around the room. Crates of mixed calibre ammo were shoved into the corner like a naughty child. My life in Marefort was bucking the inside of my head, and it took all my mental strength not to push Deadhead away and fix up his shop myself. Weapons and ammo need to be taken care of.

The crotchety old stallion seemed just a second closer to bellowing with each word. "Ever since Major Lucky an' his crew waltzed in they've been pressuring me to stop my perfectly legal business practices, and the Finishers are itch-in ta get on the NCA's good side. I ain't stickin' my neck out for some pony what I hardly know so she and her whelp-her whelp who is touchin' my guns!"

"Serenity!" My voice cracked like a whip. Instinctively, she jumped back away from the shotgun she was toying.

"S-sorry. I've just never seen a gun like it is all." Looking at the shotgun again, I just then realized why: it was a small pitch black semi-automatic shotgun with a pink stencil design. Not for kids my flank. "An's not like he's gunna keep these loaded. It's safe." Occasionally, she gave this wise beyond her years vibe, but underneath it she was still a kid, and still naive.

"Treat every gun as if it's loaded." Back when I was a filly, handling weapon maintenance and ammo sorting, I was told to treat every gun we handled that way and to treat each bullet as if it was a live grenade. Of course, I scoffed at first, thinking I was too smart (if you can believe it) for that, but after Sidewinder was shot through the neck with a shotgun on accident... well then I took those words to heart. Praying Serenity would be wiser than I, I turned back to Deadhead. "So-"

"Nope. Sorry. Can't do it. 'Less you can convince those Finishers to get the NCA off my back, I have to cut off my legitimate business practices. Shame I know. Now, buy a gun, or get the fuck out." As if I was going to buy a gun from someone who kept his stock in such ill repair. I might as well sign my own death warrant. A jammed gun at the wrong time was just asking for trouble. Yeah, I'm not the smartest pony to ever walk the Wasteland, but at least, I knew how to take care of the things that kept me alive.

Kicking the door open a bit too forcefully, I walked into the street to find a slight drizzle wetting my mane. Great. "Serenity, my leg co-" I spoke, turning around to find Serenity nowhere to be found. That was until I looked back in Deadhead's Gun Emporium. She was sitting on her haunches looking at the shotgun on the shelf above her head.

Really? So much for wisdom.

I literally pulled her out by the tail. She squealed and whinnied, but I was not in the mood to deal with such childishness. And to think she wanted to be my sidekick.

"Why no-"

"We're not talking about this." I said tossing Serenity roughly onto my back after attaching my plastic leg cover. I knew she was pouting, but I really didn't care.

"What if we get attacked again! By one of those muggers in the Mound here. Could be dangerous, could be deadly, an extra bull-"

"Would miss, or hit me on accident."

"I would not!"

"On purpose." I continued walking through the damp haze. Serenity protested on my back, but soon quieted down when she realized it was not up for debate. The rain was warm and made me feel a bit sickly as I trudged through it, but thankfully it was not very hard. We needed a place to sleep, and I'd seen an inn near the gate. At least that is what it looked like, and it looked to be open too. The streets were empty as I made my way there, save for a bedraggled blue pegasus on the sidewalk with his green and yellow mane plastered over his eyes.

Finding it through the thin rain was easy enough, as it was one of the few buildings with working lights: lights that read Death Clock Casino. Pushing the door open with my hoof, my senses were barraged. Lights flashed indiscriminately around the lobby in all the colours of the rainbow, and the ghoul comedian on stage could barely be heard over extremely loud music pounding through the speakers. The colour scheme was as gaudy as it was bright, no doubt to cover over the cracked shoddy looking walls.

"Welcome!" Blinking, I realized I was being addressed. I turned to the small front desk almost hidden in the wall and the two unicorns manning it. "... to the Vinnie May And Franny Mac Death Clock Hotel And Casino." I don't know, but the name didn't seem nearly long enough. "I'm Vinnie May," The female unicorn bowed.

"An' I'm Franny Mac..." The Male said obviously trying to mimic his partner's enthusiasm and failing. "How can we help you? We have every possible vice for sale. What shall it be? Greed? Lust?" What the hell was he talking about? After looking at him for a second, I glanced around the room spotting the separate room where numerous games tables stood just out of reach. Haunting around them, other than the gamblers that is, were multiple pretty young mares in clothes that seemed scanty even when taking into the fact most ponies didn't wear clothes. Somehow the way their short dresses emphasized their flanks made them just that little bit more tantalizing.

"Just a bed." My voice sounded sour.

"Sloth it is." He chirped, "A popular choice, now would you like some lu-"

"Just." I snapped. "A room." Clearly this Franny Mac was an idiot or a creep if he thought I was going to hire pleasure with a child in my room. Chuckling, he slid the key over to me, and I slid caps over to him. An even trade. Now if only I could think of a reason to smash his muzzle in.

"Thank you, and remember, we here at the Death Clock believe life is too short for virtues." Right, whatever.

Pushing away, I cantered up to the stairwell and ascended to the second floor. I couldn't help but notice that outside the two main rooms, the hotel let go its pretensions of excitement and painted every wall white, complete with large cracks and dust.

Our room was that much worse, looking like it hadn't been cleaned in years. A thick layer of dust covered the entire room and I had to grab the single blanket in my mouth and shake it about just to get it somewhat clean. That was not to mention the large suspicious brown stain on the wall or the tooth Serenity found when opening the cabinet. Despite this though, the room was large, dry, and, most importantly, cheap. Flopping down on the bed I closed my eyes.

"Gun..." I felt Serenity snuggle up to my chest. Luckily, I realize she was saying my name not asking for one before I chided her.

"Yes?"

"Do you like me?"

"You're being silly." I murmured. It had been a long day, and I could already feel my conscious fading. "Course I do."

"This is So boring." Wildfire bitched beside me. Apparently, walking slow through identical looking hills was not her idea of exciting. "Ah'm sayin' we need to find a way to liven this up. Whaddya say, hon?" She fluttered her long lashes at me, and already I could feel my face starting to burn up. I shook my head though.

"Pay attention." The road wined perilously, and I did not want to chance a random attack. We were two of twenty from Marefort assigned by our so called 'protectors' the Crimson Hoof to protect a valuable cart of goods north past their territory and trade off with a group that was to be meeting us there. We had not the pleasure of knowing the nature of the cargo, or why it needed so many protectors and no one really felt like asking. In Marefort if the Crimson said "Jump" our job was only to ask, "Over what?"

"To what, hon?" She giggled daintily. For some reason, the other mares in the caravan were more than happy to give us the rear guard alone, and few wandered back to talk to us. Wildfire claimed that it was because I was the frightening sort. It was hard to argue with the true sort of logic. Even back in Marefort most give me a wide breadth, and I was okay with that. Now if only Wildfire would do the same.

"Everything."

"Hmmm." She arched her back a bit and narrowed her green eyes. "This is bandit country." Rolling my eyes, I did my best to ignore her and continue after the rest. Until she tackled me that is. "Raider!" She squealed.

Standing strong, I withstood her playful attack and righted myself with Wildfire hanging off my back like a sack of apples. "I am not a raider." Struggling to maintain my composure, my mouth threatened to crack a smile. "Now g-hnng." Squealing I tried to shake her off as she tickled me. Deep breaths. Just needed to take deep breaths and resist. With a chuckle, I shook my whole body.

"Die Raider!" Why did she have to be in one of her moods? Her hooves proved too strong. My knees buckled, and I giggled. I snorted, chuckled, laughed, cracked up, and even guffawed as I broke down in the dirt, tears streaming from my eyes from laughter.

"S-stoahaha" I couldn't speak without breaking out louder. Before long, she gave up her attack and stood over me. Her red mane blowing in the wind triumphantly. Looking up, I managed to calm myself. Until an errant wind sent her mane into her eyes. Giggling like a lunatic, I buried my muzzle in my hooves. Oh Celestia, it hurt. Beside me, I could hear Wildfire start to chuckle, and eventually laugh twice as hard as I ever did. This was

ridiculous, I thought in between fits of laughter, we were supposed to be guards.

Oh yeah.

Snorting, I raised my head and confirmed my fear. The Caravan had moved along without us. Stifling back the giggles, I nudged Wildfire with my nose. She looked up at me her face red and winded from laughing. I nearly started laughing again, but I managed to stop myself. One of us had to be adult here, and she certainly wasn't rising to the occasion. "They've gone." I said pointing my head in the general direction we had been travelling.

She jumped a bit, and finally stopped laughing. For a few seconds anyway. "We'll just follow the tracks," she pointed at the dirt, "Easy pe-" Without so much as a warning, the rain came. In an instant, we were both soaking wet standing in an ever increasing mud puddle. The tracks we were going to follow were washed away faster than we could spit, and I wanted to cry... but at the sight of Wildfire's proud mop of curly raid hair plastered across her face like a wet dog I started laughing all over again.

Once we overcame the second bout of laughter and we managed to get our collective minds together, we followed along the path we had been going. Since our group had been following the road, we too followed it, and none to pleased as the hard rain pounded down with ever increasing force. The water froze us to our very bones, and the mud was far from being helpful. It was sickening to the point Wildfire had cozied up to me as we walked, sniffing and sneezing.

Then we reached the fork.

Suddenly, and for no reason I could see other than to piss me off, the road split into three separate paths. Try as I might I could not suss out which road it was that our companions had travelled. Wildfire shook violently. I didn't get the benefit of time to figure it out either. Growling, I hefted her onto my back like a sack of apples (funny how often that happens). She was heavy, but nothing I couldn't handle as I galloped towards the nearest hillside praying for a cave. For once, Celestia saw fit to answer me.

The entrance to cave stood right in front of me, seemingly glowing through the thick rain. Perhaps it was destiny that brought us to this particular cave. Easing Wildfire down as we entered, I gave her a minute to rest. She coughed and weezed but quickly got back to her feet grimacing. "Fuckin' chest." She mumbled to herself.

"Lets go in further." The very last thing we needed was a raider gang to find this cave with us asleep.

Although, as we traversed the dank cave it became clear that a raider gang had already found it. The darkness that should have been there was replaced by an orange glow as we walked further. The cave expanded into a great cavern showing the remains of some hidden village. And it was on fire.

Not a lot of fire though, just the smouldering remains of certain stubborn buildings that turned the entire cavern into orange light and dancing black shadows. I marched Wildfire over to the smallest and seemingly safest of these fires and bade her rest. She had gotten us into this mess, but now that we were knee deep in it (and I am not talking about the mud here, though it had stained both our coats to our knees) I had to take charge. "I'll see if there's food." Taking one look at me with her weary green eyes, she nodded, and I trotted away.

Food proved difficult, however, as I searched through the wreckage of the village. Pushing over rubble, I saw a blood stained hoof sticking out. Gulping, I backed up. It was strange that we hadn't seen any bodies, and this one was blackened by fire and crushed. Whatever happened here, I was certain that I did not want to know. "Silver..." Wildfire called to me.

Ignoring her, I continued my search for food making sure to stay far away from the crushed corpse. "Silver." She repeated. After what her games caused I was not in the mood for her whining. Waving my hoof dismissively, I prodded through a small stack of burnt sheet metal. "Silver!"

"WH-" I saw what. Cuddled between her fore legs was a charcoal grey filly.

I woke up in an understandably pissy mood. There were bad dreams and then there were dreams about her; that charcoal filly I'd been doing my best to forget. Even though I knew her name, I refused to think about. Desperately searching for something, anything, else to think about my eyes caught Serenity. They could not have been more different, but just seeing another filly brought back the feelings again. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Hi-hired?" She said her eyes only half open. I nodded slowly. "Are you okay?" I nodded again. "You look like you're about'ta cry..." I stopped for a second to wipe the tears from my eyes before reaching a hoof out to embrace Serenity.

"I'm fine." I know I didn't sound fine, and I sure as fuck didn't feel fine, but I wanted her to think I was. "What time is it?" She shrugged as I turned towards the shattered remains of our room window to see dull light peeking in, filtered through the ever present layers of clouds. I could only guess that it was morning.

With a deep chested sigh, I struggled to all fours, my metal leg dull and motionless beneath me. Damn shame too, as I was down to my last power crystal and was hoping this one would last a little bit longer. No point with what ifs though, so I motioned for Serenity to grab me a new one and carefully inserted it into my leg. I could barely hear Serenity speak up over the sound of my leg whirling to a start, "Does it hurt?"

"What?"

"Your leg."

"Oh." I smiled down at her and shook my head. "Only around magic."

She blinked.

"Magic... but that don't make sense it is magic partly. All Cybernetics are, dont'cha know, else gems wouldn't work for power. How can it hurt around magic?" Her face scrunched up a little as she poked at my leg. In truth it was more like it burned because whatever Starmetal poisoning is but I really didn't want to get into that whole shebang.

"Don't worry." I said, beckoning her to follow me out of the room.

And it wasn't nearly soon enough. After staying there even the air tasted dusty. Marching downstairs, I took the time to think of some sort of plan. Clearly, I needed to talk to the Finishers and find a way to convince them to stop the NCA from arresting Deadhead, so I could partake in his perfectly legitimate business services, or find away to get enough money to get into Dise myself. The question was answered for me as a red mare in a black, white, and pink stripped dress was waiting for me at the bottom of the steps.

"Mrs. Hired Gun." What no accent?

"Awww, you should use the funny voice." Serenity said beside me mirroring my thoughts. Good Girl. All the better to make me seem less stupid.

"Wh-I. It matters not." Compared to the blue pony I spoke to yesterday, she was markedly less fun. "You are Hired Gun and her companion, are you not?" At least she didn't say Serenity was my daughter. That was starting to get annoying. She kept talking well before I could even confirm my identity. "I have been instructed to bring you to the fabulous Photo Finish. Now, come. It is neither polite nor wise to keep such a wonderful mare waiting." She put no effort into her speech at all, sounding trite and listless.

I followed along equally as listlessly. I'd been hoping to make the choice on my own, instead of it being forced upon me. Of course, I could always have said no to Photo Finish, but I had a feeling in my gut that it was going to be a really good offer. So as we walked through the rainy streets of Parasite Mound I did my best to not let my disappointment show.

Which was easy enough when Serenity decided to make a show of jumping in puddles. I smiled for a minute before pushing her out and on our way. I didn't want to chance her catching a cold.

I started up my radio to distract her from the ever growing number of puddles, *"It's Mr New Haygas here again with that thing we call, 'the news!' Shocking, I know. Well, it seems a store owner in Bridle Hope has been found dead of natural causes: a three o'eight caliber embolism. As natural as it gets in the Wasteland. Residents are unsure how the assassin managed to kill her unnoticed or why anypony would want such a kindly ma-"*

"Turn it off," Serenity pleaded. She didn't have to ask twice. That was not really the sort of distraction I'd been expecting, or wanted. How could I have forgotten where I had found Serenity locked up in the first place? Luckily enough, we happened to have gotten to our destination anyway.

It was a stout corner building that had the distinction of looking relatively well maintained in comparison to everything else and to have working lights in all the windows. On the front, painted pink and gold were the words, "Photo Finish Gallery Of Ze Magicks". I had no idea what that was supposed to mean as we walked into the building.

It was surprisingly subdued. There was a simple pink patterned wallpaper, but nothing nearly so gaudy as the Death Clock Casino, save for the multitude of mares wandering about in their matching outfits. Except, they weren't all mares. I never would have noticed had I not have been staring a bit too closely at one of their rears. I quickly looked away, flushed and drove it from my memory. Thinking they were all mares would just be easier on my mind.

"We go." The red mare we had been following said, suddenly gaining an outrageous accent, trotting at a much quicker pace that we were forced to follow. The winding halls had many doors flashing past my vision as we ran. Some seemed like bedrooms, or dressing rooms, but many more were plain rooms adorned with white backdrops and a series of large lights and cameras. The second floor, I learned as we zoomed up the stairs and through it, consisted almost entirely of sleeping chambers. By the third floor of running, I was just about ready to hit this stupid red pony. Why the hell was the boss's room on the top floor? By Celestia, that was aggravating. What I wouldn't give for an elevator.

We finally made it, red faced and out of breath. The red Finisher bade us to take some time and compose ourselves (meaning make it look like we hadn't just run up three flights of stairs) before opening the door and letting us see what all the fuss was about. The room was simple and nearly without ornamentation save the multitude of cushions on the floor and small pink bed with a huge closet beside it. Inside the room was (gasp) the same blue pony we had met yesterday. "You bring them?" She asked, and the red Finisher nodded. "Wunderbar. Screenshot, go." She pointed dramatically as Screenshot galloped back out.

"Screenshot is loyal, ja?" She said, directing her glass-covered eyes to me and Serenity, "Not, as you would say, enthusiastic." She smiled a bit, pointing to a series of cushions in front of her, "Sit. Now." Something about her voice demanded to be listened to.

"I, Photo Finish, am going to make you a star." She said, raising a hoof to the sky dramatically as we sat down. Serenity started to giggle until I shot her a look.

"I'm not a model." Had to get that out in the open as soon as possible. Wildfire bought me a dress once. I'll spare you the gory details, but suffice to say, it did not end well for anypony.

"Dahling, of course not. No. I, Photo Finish, have greater plans for you." She rose to her blacklegs with her forelegs waving triumphantly in the air before standing back up proper. She sure was laying it on thick. "You have heard of the Enclave Remnants, ja?"

"Vaguely." I shrugged, waiting for her to stop moving so erratically. "Met one. Claimed his group broke off from the ones above. So?" To be clear, she did not once stop moving around: like a gold fish on dash.

"They are strong! Fearsome! Rich! The Finishers MUST have them for allies! However, a delinquent known as Flare, a former Enclave himself, has taken to Parasite Mound and causing no end to trouble. His drug addled ways are an embarrassment to the Remnants, and embarrassments they do not oft forget. He must be reformed or taken care of. Obviously we, The Finishers, seek to educate the word of beauty and glamour. Killing is not our way."

"So?" Still waiting for a job offer.

"So say he found a way off drugs or... went missing."

"Remnants might crack a smile, so?" She faced hoofed dramatically. Adding the adverb dramatically after everything she did was getting redundant so feel free to add it yourself from now on.

"So if you, Hired Gun, deal with said pony, you may find Deadhead's business up and at your eloquent command. Moreover, you may find the greatest gang in all of Dise in your debt. You'll become famous, a rising star in a city of rocks." I was not sure whether to comment on the creepiness that she knew about me trying to get a passport, the irony of her rising star comment given my cutie mark, or the fact she spoke so passionately she knocked a lamp off her desk with a crash.

"Sure." I said, shrugging my shoulders.

"Now!" She pointed at the door, "You go!"

He wasn't hard to find.

"And Then They Came Flying Outta The Sky Like Whoooooos Whamp But I Wasn't Scared So I Took Out My Guns All Like ChimmieChanga Ratatatatat! BOOM SMASH! Got Shot Pretty Bad But Ya Know I Wasn't Scared Picked My Self Up An-" At this point, I feel it is important to mention all I did was ask him his name. Serenity giggled along with him as he chanted his story in a tone I was positive part enthusiasm and part Dash. No wonder the Remnants thought he was an embarrassment. He was. "And THATS Why They Call Me Flare!"

"And *then* what happened?"

"Serenity, please." For my sanity, I silently pleaded for him to shut the fuck up.

"Well You See I-"

"Am addicted." I finished for him, shocking him enough to finally land, giving me a good look at him.

His blonde and green mane stuck to his head and down his neck, falling just above his pink bloodshot eyes. Whisking his similarly colour tail behind him, I could see him tense up his light blue body underneath his red jumpsuit. He was so skinny I could see his ribs through his clothes.

"Fuck No! Yeah I Take'a Puff Now And Then To Calm My Nerves Bu-" Did he just say calm? Oh for fucks sake. I charged.

My head slammed into his chest, cracking ribs and sending him sprawling to the ground, wings spread out and losing feathers. Stepping up, I pressed my un-metal hoof on his neck.

"Hired, don't hurt him!" Serenity squealed behind me. Against my better judgement, I released some tension on his neck giving him just enough room to cough uncomfortably.

"Listen. Carefully." I said, lowering my head so close that my warm breath blew on his neck standing his coat up on ends, "You are an addict. That means The Remnants don't like you. So the Finishers don't like you. I need

them to like you. So they can help me.” Was that subtle enough? I was never sure. By the way he was shivering under my hoof on the cold grey street I figured he got the message.

“Man Fuck You! I Can Take Whatever I Want It’s A Free-”

“No. It’s not.”

“Mr Flare.” Serenity poked her head around my leg and moved close to him. “You should listen to my-” If she said mommy I swear, “friend. She’s all like a mercenary, ya knows? You’re a nice mister, and I like your stories, but Photo told Hired to get ya off tha streets one way or’nother.”

“Bloody Rainclouds... You Want Me Clean So The Remnants Can Save Face Well Fuck Them!”

“I want you clean.” Drug addicts piss me off. “So I don’t have to kill you.” My hoof pressed down hard on his neck, and I could feel his neck bone pressing against my hoof. His face started to purple and he gasped, but I didn’t let go until he nodded his stupid drug-addled head.

“Ack. Fine. Bitch. Don’t.” He gasped for breath on his back as I stepped back with his wings flapping uselessly, “I. I Wanted To Kick... to kick the Dash. Nothing but trouble. It’s good I mean but...” He blinked for a second, staring up at me. It almost looked like he was about to cry. Just what I needed, more crying ponies.

“What do you need?”

“What?”

“To get you clean.” I don’t imagine it’d be anything as simple as talking to a scary mare with a metal leg, or ‘give me ten doses of ‘fixer’ and I’ll totally quit forever’. Though I am sure those two things helped. “Actually. Serenity, search him.” The familiar burning sensation of Serenity’s magic flared up in my shoulder as her horn glowed lightly. A faint pink glow surrounded the Pegasus as various unmentionables flew out of his pockets.

In total, we collected seven doses of Dash, two syringes of med-X, a pill bottle of buck, something called Hydra, three tin containers of Mint-als, and one of its cousin Party Time Mint-als. All of which I stuffed deep in my pack for later. Not to use, to sell obviously. Though it was tempting, as Serenity was removing them Flare thought it necessary to go into a long winded speech about the effects of each of them. Honestly, the idea of chewing a mint and suddenly becoming smarter sounded farfetched to me. According to him, he only took Dash, and just kept the rest to trade with other addicts if need be; I didn’t believe him.

“Now. We need you clean. Or clean enough.” All the drugs weighing down my pack made me feel more dirty than the mere thought that I’d stolen them from an addict. A sign of the times I guess.

“Clean enough for what? Yeah it’s just a job for you, ain’t it? Clean enough then leave me back to the wolves, might as well kill me yo-”

“Shut up.” Apparently, nearly strangling a pony to near death was enough to convince him to listen when you speak. “Enough to get into Dise. You’ll come with me. See the Watchers.”

“As if the Watchers woul-”

“They would so!” Serenity literally bounced, “The Watchers help every, and I mean *everypony* that needs it s’long as you can get to them. They could fix you up something good I tell you. Got special methods of flushin’ the body outta toxins and what have you. Come on, whaddya say? Let us help you help us help you help us both?”

Wait, what?

“Wait, what?” Flare intoned before I got the chance. “Wh-whatever. Yeah. Okay. I need Fixer. And... okay this is going to seem odd, but I’m broke.” Taking one look over his skinny body and dirty clothes I raised an eyebrow,

"That's not the weird part. It's that... there's this gang, hiding under the Finishers noses. They like, they like sell this shit real cheap like. Without them, I wouldn't be able buy nothin'. It'd help, if they were, you know." No, I did not. "Disappeared ." I raised an eyebrow, "Fucking kill them, I mean."

"Oh." Huh. Now that was a dilemma. I shook the rain out of my hair as I thought. Normally, I would have to charge a lot for a job like that as it involved murder-like activities. On the other hoof, this whole thing was more like a huge job with the ending being entrance to Dise. Then again, I just procured hundreds of caps worth of drugs (or as Deadhead would call them 'perfectly legal reality modifiers'). I guess a few drug dealers were worth it. How armed could drug dealers be. "Okay."

"Hah, you ain't so bad, Miss Hi-"

"On the condition you come with." The shock on his face was clear and very amusing. The thing is: I couldn't justify leaving Serenity by herself at the hotel in a place like Parasite Mound, and I certainty was not going to let a drug addict look after her while I was away. The only logical choice was to bring them both and have Flare and Serenity stay far enough back to avoid fire, but close enough I would be able to keep track of them. Then again, I am an idiot.

"Now." Maybe I should have waited for him to agree, but that would involve giving a damn what he thought. "Where is this base."

"Below." He said shakily.

"Below us?" Well that didn't sound good at all.

"Ain't you never heard of the Paradise Sewers?"

Sewers was a patently incorrect term. Apparently, the massive underground tunnels buried beneath the last city were created as a fallout shelter by a wealthy stallion who owned most of the city before the war, Mr Walkkirk as Flare called him. Not trusting Stable-Tec to protect non-Equestrians, he built them under the disguise of a massive storm drain for the yearly storms that often flooded parts of the city. From the looks of it, they did neither job well. Unless you counted being a pain in the ass to get into a job well done.

Sure there were many ponyhole covers and drains that led into it, but there was no way for anypony (unless you're a Pegasus) to go straight down without, you know, falling. So we had to find and locate a small rubble strewn building with one of the few entrances available in the Parasite Mound. After finding it, it was up to me to push the heavy lid off the hole in the ground revealing a spiral stair case that was disturbingly narrow. After the harrowing climb, for me anyway as Flare just flew and Serenity rode on my back, we finally made it into the sewers.

We came out of the small stair room into a long hall with vaulted ceilings and grey walls covered in cracked and yellowing with decay. Even still, the lights on each wall were still lit. The floor was a metal grate that made my leg clang nosily with each step. Below the rusting grate was a swirling river of green water that seemed to flow into small crevices in the wall.

"Know anything else 'bout this place?" The sound of water leaking in through cracks in the ceiling or from grates connecting to the surface was going to drive me bonkers. Even Flare was preferable.

"I know everything! Back before I quit the Remnants, we used these tunnels for secret transport. Goes all across Dise they do," Well, why the hell didn't we just take these instead of going through the front door, "But all the entrances to Dise proper been claimed by some gang and are monitored and the like. Still a bribe is off' nough to convince them, but they might take it and kill you anyway," Sounded like a lovely time. "Still lotsa ponies live down here," He motioned his head to a door to my right, "That leads to a small village. Nice folk. Most're shy though, stay underground cept for trading and scavenge. Though plenty of scavenge to be had here. Lotsa

places here weren't radiation proof so ponies died clutching their remaining treasure. If ya don't gotta problem scavenging from corpses." Well if history has shown anything...

"Wait." He stopped turning to a small door with a brown stain on it in the shape of an 'X'. "In here. Okay. Just go in. Take them out. Easy peasy lemon squeezy, right?"

"Right." I bucked open the door with a resounding crash.

The poor guard didn't know what hit him as my bullet shot through his brain pan, splattering the wall with gore. Squealing behind me, Serenity hid behind Flare. As much as I hated bringing her to a place like this, I could see no other real way of protecting her. Yes, I'm an idiot, why do you ask?

The hallway on the other side of the door was different than the main hall. It had no grate on the floor or river underneath, and while its walls were still high they weren't as much so. The lights on the wall were similarly still working, but very dim.

Oh yeah, and hanging on the roof was a flayed pony in a spread eagle position like a grotesque flag.

"Flare." I warned. "Make sure Serenity does not look up."

Me, I couldn't help myself. The thing was staring down at me with empty holes where eyes should have been with its lips peeled away showing a row of broken teeth. Its' entire coat and skin was stripped away to the muscles underneath, some half clinging to the body and half falling down loosely revealing bones underneath. Tearing my eyes off the monstrous monument to pony indignity, I made my way back down the hall.

The doors on either side of the fall way seemed for the most part, boarded up and blocked with debris, so I ignored them. The only door that seemed to matter was the small door on the other end of the hall. Which opened.

That wasn't good.

Two ponies appeared from inside the room, which seemed to me to be an excessively small broom closet. I never did get a good look at them as I realized one was magically holding a rocket launcher.

No time. I spun around. Grabbing Serenity and Flare, I dove behind a pile of debris just as a rocket flared past.

The sound was deafening. The light blinding. It exploded against far wall, covering us in dust as we huddled in relative safety. Minutes passed until the roaring in my ears settled down, but my head still stung and voices were fuzzy.

"You okay, Hired?" Serenity said, looking up at me surprisingly unhurt with her horn glowing lightly. Nodding, I turned my attention to the door. Peeking out from the rubble, I scanned for our attackers. Only. They weren't there. The only sound I could hear, and admittedly my hearing was still weak, was a faint trickle of water from the main hallway far behind us.

"Wait here." Flare nodded dumbly, biting his lip so hard it looked almost bleeding. Sneaking out from behind the rubble pile I turned back to where we came. Past the door I kicked in, the grey wall was black and even more cracked with the entrance itself measurable larger than it had been. Making my way slowly, I crept as low as my massive body could go until I reached the supply closet.

To find two charred ponies.

From their back legs to their necks, they were a blackened mess of burnt flesh and hair smelling vaguely food like. My stomach rebelled at the thought and I quickly turned away from them, motioning for my gang to move forward. Not before pushing the corpses back into the similarly burnt room and closing the door.

“What happened?” Flare said with strange brevity.

“Backblast.” Another weapons lesson from long ago. Rocket launchers expel gas out the back to avoid massive kickback. But if fired with ponies behind you or in a sealed room, the effects... were as seen. Potentially deadly, and always stupid. “Not the brightest ponies.” Serenity giggled a bit, while Flare just shrugged looking around warily.

“Shouldn't we be... ” He started

“Going,” yeah yeah. Can't I bask in the glory of the one thing I actually know?

The next stage in our roaring rampage of revenge was easy enough to figure out. The drug dealers were not the brightest, as already pointed out, and their sections of the sewers had every door blocked save the ones that lead to the bosses chambers. So I simply went through the only possible door on the right side of hall beside the storage closet.

This room was nothing more than a small room, with three bunk beds pressed against the walls. I scanned the room twice over making sure no ponies were hiding in wait. If they didn't know we were here by now, they were truly not very bright, I took a single step.

BEEP.

Fuck. Looking down, I gulped, already feeling sweat trickle down the back of my neck. Under my hoof was a small disk that was beeping ominously up at me. Slowly, I started to lift my hoof up.

“Wait!” Flare zoomed past me, floating at eye level his wings beating hard, “Don't move! That's a mine! You'll blow yourself the fuck up, and less you wanna lose the other leg just don't move.” Nothing made a pony more fidgety than being told not to move. “Just. Don't. I'll get it.” Reaching into his pack, he came out with a bobby pin and a screw driver in his mouth, “Ah got 'is” he mumbled.

Five tense minutes later, the beeping stopped.

Lifting my hoof off slowly, I was relieved I didn't explode. Grinning, the blue pegasus snatched the device in his mouth and sliding it back into his pack. “What? I used to be an explosion expert way back 'fore I quit. Know how'ta make'em explode and you know how to make them... not... explode. Ya know?”

I'd had no idea, but I was still kicking. I attempted to pat him on the back to no avail because at the touch he quickly twitched backwards leaving me hanging.

He said, “S-sorry. Last time-” I almost choked him to death. Funny, in wake of him saving my life I'd forgotten that fact. Honestly, considering the facts, I was surprised he went through the trouble of saving my life to begin with. I tore him from his comfort zone into a bloody war zone, he should want me dead.

Ponies made no sense.

“Lets go.” The small bedroom was small enough, and completely empty of life. Not wanting to waste time I charged forward-

“Wait!” Flare screamed, “Aint'cha gunna look around.” Look around? I turned my head one way. Then the other. Boxes, boxes, bed, trash, locked safe, bed and bed. Looking around done. “I mean scavenge, They've got to have good loot.” Please tell me he was kidding. From the way his pink eyes pleaded with me, I knew he wasn't.

“We're kinda of in a hurry.”

“Bu-”

"Hiiiiired," Serenity whined, "Just for one minute," How could I say no to those big puppy dog eyes. Fillies were tricky.

"Five Minutes." Much squeeing and position giving away was had. Then again, I was pretty sure by that point everyone was well aware we were coming, and I kind of liked the idea of ponies cowering behind desks wondering if we'd ever come for them.

"Hired." I heard the pink filly wail as her magic struggled with a locked safe. "Helllp!" With a heavy sigh (funny how often I sigh, isn't it?), I slowly walked over to the small metal box. "It won't open, you need to--"

CLANG

The metal box reflected my leg, sending it shooting back so hard I nearly lost my balance, "Why would you do that! You can't kick everything open. You're going to ruin your leg!" Sure I could. I just needed more practice. Trying to step my metal hoof down, I suddenly wobbled, nearly toppling over before I took my weight off it. The fucking hoof of my metal leg was bent all askew and Serenity was giggling triumphantly at my distress. That was, until I slammed the damn thing down as hard as I could, forcing it back to its original state. Mostly.

"Time's up. Lets go."

All counted we had collected: A huge pile of trash. I loathed the thought that I'd have to try and sell that shit later. Not that I really had the option to throw it out the way Serenity was watching me. What the heck would I ever need wonderglue for? Maybe if we had actually managed to open that damn safe it'd have been worth the time (and embarrassment) it took. "We done?"

"Haaah. Thanks. We need ta scavenge more often. Back in tha Watchers they used to tell me the Wastelanders would be much better off if they stopped to look through empty rooms. He said could be your life in there." Because that made perfect sense. "Lets go."

Like the rest of this poorly designed drug dealer base, the room was completely linear. Two doors, the one we came from and a wooden door on the other side of the room.

It couldn't be more simple. In fact, this whole adventure had been just a teensy bit too easy. Apart from nearly being blow up... twice. I've changed my mind this whole adventure had been a pain in the flank and it'd be a goddess send once we finally got out of this filthy, stinking hole in the ground.

I knocked twice on the wooden door shouting through it, "Listen up. Who's ever in there. Leave now. Leave everything on the floor. You live. Fight back. You die." I backed up a step and waited, my eyes watching the door. I was just hoping the remaining drug dealers on the other side were sane enough to take my offer. They weren't.

Then it exploded.

Shrapnel tore through the air as the shock wave sent me spinning to the ground. My ears roared as my body smacked against the the floor. I groaned as the flames washed over me briefly, leaving me sore but alive. Lifting my head, I saw the body of a purple mare drug dealer, glowering at me through the smoke. There was no time to think.

I rolled quickly on my back, a shot ringing against the floor where I'd been laying. Struggling to my feet, my hearing returned, broadcasting the groans of my companions behind me... followed shortly by a second shot. Pain struck through my ear and already I could feel the blood flowing down my cheek. I didn't allow her a third shot.

My first bullet tore through her leg and sending her to a bloody knee. The second slammed into her chest with a meaty thud. She looked straight at me as the life faded from her eyes. Gasping for one last breath, she slowly toppled over; a pool of blood forming around her corpse.

I forced myself to look away, releasing a breath I realized I was holding. My ear throbbed and my face felt sticky with blood. "Well." I turned to my companions, "That went we-" It had been going so well too. Cleared out a drug nest. Helped out a community. Saved a pegasus from addiction. And got a pass into the City Of Lights for our efforts. Of course I couldn't have such luck.

Serenity was lying in Flare's forelegs breathing heavily. A large wooden splinter was lodged into her chest.

Footnote:

New perk! Element Of Loyalty: When you drop below 50% HP, companions gain DT.

Skill note: Explosives 25

(A Special thanks of course to that marvelous mare, Kkat. As well as a thanks to theBSDude and Errant who made this readable without bleeding eyes)

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