

Chapter 3: Under New Management

“So, I set out to try my luck in the big city: Manehattan!”

Pink.

Of all the colours of the spectrum, pink is normally one of the most cheerful. It is usually associated with parties, candy, streamers, and other joyous things. However, if you put it together with certain other words, it can lose much of its pleasantry. 'Pink' plus 'slip' gives you the notification that you're out of a job. 'Pink' and 'eye' produce a rather nasty irritation. 'Pink' and 'cloud', I would discover, yielded the name given to the foulest necromancy spell that the Zebras had ever developed. That same Pink Cloud now covered every inch of Canterlot.

Upon seeing this horrendous sight, May had gone into shock. I had wanted to comfort her, hoping to calm her down and get a proper explanation of why she was upset. I didn't get the chance. May began to cry out horrendously, thrashing involuntarily. I tried to calm her, but all I got for my trouble was a hoof in the jaw. I was scared for her, and called out for help at the top of my lungs.

I was greatly relieved that my new friends managed to hear my cries. Within moments, Raider and Gizmo both joined me on the edge of town. Raider had a syringe in his mouth, which he handed off to Gizmo's telekinetic grasp to free up his mouth, informing me that it was a sedative. I imagined he had previous experience dealing with prisoners throwing fits during his time at Shattered Hoof. Raider and I then proceeded to pin May's thrashing limbs while Gizmo stuck the needle into her thigh.

The effect was immediate. May's thrashing died away and she went limp. Her anguished cries quieted until they were little more than whimpers. Finally, she drifted into unconsciousness, allowing Raider and I to lift her up. We took her back to the clinic, laying her on an empty cot. I pulled a blanket over her, hoping to stop the small shudders her body still gave off. Wanting to give her a chance to rest, the three of us left her alone and exited the clinic.

“What happened?” asked Gizmo once the three of us were outside.

“I'm not entirely sure,” I answered honestly. I started walking towards the edge of town so I could show them the view of Canterlot as well. “She saw Canterlot, mentioned Littlehorn and then threw a fit.”

“Everypony knows about the Littlehorn massacre,” said Gizmo, sighing and lowering his head as he recalled it. “My older sister died there when I was just a foal. I don't see what that has to do with Canterlot though.”

“I do,” said Raider, his gaze fixed on the distant cliff side. He stared at it with a hint of disbelief, then turned to face Gizmo and I with an explanation. “I read the reports on the Littlehorn Massacre once; most upper level military personnel would have as well, considering the new weapon that was used there.”

I suddenly had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I knew I was not going to like what I was about to hear. My sympathies went out to May for having already known. “What was it?”

“They called it the Pink Cloud,” replied Raider, pointing to Canterlot. “Obvious really. What's not

obvious is the extreme lethality of it. Only one pony ever survived exposure, and barely at that. Poison gas laced with necromantic magic, at least so far as I understand.” Being an earth pony, Raider having a less than adept understanding of the intricacies of magic made sense. I didn’t know much about it either. “If I had to guess, I'd say Canterlot got hit with a megaspell version of it.”

“What about the Princesses?” I demanded frantically. May had been confident that Luna and Celestia could thwart a megaspell attack on the capital. However, if one had in fact gotten through, particularly one as awful as Raider made the Pink Cloud out to be, then the hope that they were still alive was murdered brutally.

Raider shook his head. “I couldn't tell you. The Princesses are made of tougher stuff than any normal pony, but even they have their limits.” I suddenly felt dizzy. “There's a chance they could still be up there, but I can guarantee that everypony else in the city is dead.”

That was it, game over. If the Princesses were gone, then there was truly no hope for Equestria.

“Maybe not,” chimed in Gizmo. I glanced at him, the dreadful feeling in my gut almost screaming for him to say something that might rekindle my hope. He looked hesitant, clearly shaken by the news of the Pink Cloud, but a small bit of determination came through on his features.

He clamped down on that bit and spoke: “Stable One was built in Canterlot, and it was designed specifically to house the Princesses and most of the upper echelons of Equestria's government. Apple Bloom suspected that Canterlot, being the capital, might have to deal with bigger threats than balefire bombs. There's no way she wouldn't have made adjustments to the Stable's design to allow for those possibilities.”

I was skeptical. As nice as it sounded to know that Canterlot was home to a Stable for the Princesses, there was no guarantee that they had made it in. As well, just because Stable Two had been filled and sealed successfully, that didn't mean all of the other Stables had. I voiced these concerns to Gizmo.

“The regular Pink Cloud was shown to be able to soak into or pass through just about anything,” added Raider, “A megaspell version could only be more potent.”

“Granted, there's no guarantee of anything right now, but...” Gizmo looked up to the grey, cloud filled sky. The glow of daylight filtered through it...

What Gizmo was alluding to suddenly clicked. “The Sun!” I declared, the knot in my stomach loosening, though not quite as much as I might have liked. “It's still moving!” There was no way that the sun would be moving on its own, it never had. Somewhere, somehow, the Princesses must still be looking out for Equestria. They had to be.

The entire incident surrounding the discovery of the Pink Cloud had left me feeling extremely drained. I retired to the clinic, laying on a cot close to May's. I hoped that what Raider, Gizmo and I had discussed could bring her some peace when she awoke. Raider came along, having been ripped from his own rest by my call for help. Gizmo returned to the Stable-Tec outlet with the intention of seeing if he could fish anything else out of the terminal, as well as get to work on the miscellaneous bits of technology that were left. I dozed off eventually, glad to have a brief reprieve from the terrible things

going on.

I awoke some time later, though not entirely sure how long due to the lack of an ankle watch or wall mounted clock in my immediate viewing range. What I could see was May, awake, and apparently fussing over the burn victim again. She had removed some of his bandages, although he was still completely hairless. At least he seemed to be able to move under his own power again.

Noticing his lack of hair, I thought to what had happened right before May's fit. Looking closely, forcing my lazy eye to look straight at her, I noticed that patches of hair were missing all over her coat. Most notably, her cutie mark was marred by several roughly shed patches, half of the image missing on either flank. As well, much of her tail hair was gone, a few strands even falling away as I looked on. Her mane was only marginally better.

Finished with the burned buck, she let him get back to resting. She turned around and came back in my direction, noticing that I was awake. "May, are you..." I began to ask if she was alright, but she preempted me.

"I'm fine, mostly," she said, although I was certain she was lying. I imagine she was busying herself with caring for the other survivors to avoid thinking about Canterlot and the Pink Cloud. "Radiation exposure is NOT good for one's hair, but it should only be temporary."

When she got close enough, I pulled May in with both forelegs (now lacking their braces), and hugged her for all I was worth. "You know that's not what I meant," I said into her ear.

May gave a shudder, then began to sob wretchedly into what was left of my mane. Much like her, although I hadn't been paying so much attention, I had suffered a lot of hair loss. I rubbed her back and let her cry for a while, not saying anything. I started to cry a bit as well, needing the release as much as she did. We eventually stopped, and I released her from the hug. She wiped her eyes with her hooves, more bits of her coat flaking away. I did the same. With her tears stopped, I told May what Gizmo and I had discussed.

"Then there's still hope," May concluded once I told her about Stable One. The part about the movement of the Sun seemed to do her a world of good. I couldn't shake a feeling that she was forcing herself to feel that bit of hope, but I ignored it, wanting to feel it for myself as well. "They won't be able to get out while the Pink Cloud persists, but it should eventually disperse." Despite the return of her optimism, she looked rough, although I couldn't blame her considering all she had been through. I imagined I didn't look much better.

I had apparently awoken late in the morning. The other survivors (aside from the burn victim) were up and around as well. Under the direction of Raider and May, we went through the town, gathering up any provisions we could find. Although the town had been spared a Zebra attack, the fallout from the megaspells would eventually find its way there. May was particularly concerned about bottling and refrigerating as much water from the still clean river before its source turned foul.

By the end of the day, we had gathered a decent amount of food and water. The town had been home to many hundreds of ponies prior to its evacuation, and had more than enough to accommodate the nine of us as we were. That notion had given May the idea of turning the town into a refuge for other survivors. How she planned to find them or notify them was not clear, but it still struck me as a good idea. If we had managed to survive, then others would have too, and they would need a safe haven.

The other thing to come about by day's end was the near baldness of May and me. She was a bit luckier than I was in that regard, possibly because she was younger. We had both lost our coats in their entirety, and my tail was little more than a stub. May still had some of her tail hair, and about half of her mane. I had a few strands at most. I had even lost a few feathers! May found our situation comical for some reason, perhaps because of all the things radiation could have done to us, baldness was of least concern to her as a physician. It was also the least of our problems to come.

Lastly, May gathered the rest of us together at the end of the day, apparently with an announcement. "I'm heading back to Manehattan."

"What?" we all declared in unison. Raider's objection was particularly loud, but that was largely because his voice was louder than anypony else.

"That's suicide," declared the former warden. "Look at what the megaspell radiation did to you outside the city," he noted, looking her nearly hairless form up and down. "The city center will be a thousand times worse."

"I know what radiation can do Raider," May retorted matter-of-factly. "I was in the MoP Spell Research Division. However; the hair loss is a cosmetic problem at worst, and I'm plenty well enough to travel."

"Your current wellness won't change the effect radiation has on you," Raider insisted. He was wrong, but none of us knew that yet. "You went from healthy to puking blood after just a few moments of extreme exposure."

"That's only because I was caught off guard." May made that statement with more certainty than I had seen coming from her in a while. "I told you, I was in MoP Spell Research, and not without good reason."

Intending to demonstrate her point, May's horn lit up with soft red light. That same glow rippled in the air around her, eventually forming into a solid hemisphere surrounding her. Her horn flashed again, and the glow around her shimmered, the colour changing to a pale green. It looked a little like the glow I had seen coming from Stable-Tec terminals. The glow around May's horn died and the shield faded away.

"Radiation ward and shielding spell," May stated firmly. "I can keep them up long enough to reach the Manehattan MAS hub."

Finally, I spoke up. "Why do you need to go to there?" I had already seen that May was willing to go to extremes to try and help ponies, but considering that it had survived a megaspell hit, the Ministry of

Arcane Sciences hub seemed like the last place that would need her help.

May looked taken aback, and I felt awkward. Thankfully, her next statement relieved my anxiousness. "Right, I keep forgetting to explain these things first." She took a deep breath, steeling her resolve. "Somepony needs to tell them about Canterlot," she said. We all knew about it now, but anypony else who didn't have a clear view of the capital wouldn't yet.

"Furthermore," she continued, "they need to know about Ponyville. Magpie has been broadcasting across Equestria almost nonstop for the past five days. We can't be the only survivors, but we're among the only ones who have a safe haven right now. If I can get to Magpie, I can tell her about Ponyville, and she can tell everypony else who's listening. Plus, they probably have ponies in need of medical aid. They did endure a megaspell detonation after all."

I suddenly found myself looking at May with something bordering on reverence. She had suffered from the worst of magical radiation poisoning, seen the city of Manehattan wiped from existence before her very eyes, and even seen somepony she had been trying to save die right in front of her. Despite that, all she wanted to do was help as many ponies as she could. Through the Ministry of Peace, she had been doing so since before the megaspells went off. I suddenly felt inadequate, having spent the entirety of the war as a simple courier.

However, one could never be too old to change. I stepped forward; "I'm going with you."

May looked at me like I was crazy. That was funny, since the feeling was mutual. "Are you sure about that? This isn't some simple supply run."

Now it was my turn to sound offended; "Obviously you've never flown in a hailstorm before." I glared at her, holding the serious expression a bit longer than I thought I could. I broke into a grin, then began to laugh heartily. More than I had in longer than I could remember. May joined in, nearly falling over onto her side in stitches.

We continued laughing for a good couple minutes, needing to take that little bit of joy for all it was worth. Once it was finished, I walked up to May, standing by her side. "I hope you know what you're getting into," she nickered.

"About as much as you do," I replied with a snort.

Raider stepped forth as well. "I can't let you go by yourselves. I'm coming with you."

"Me too," chimed in Gizmo, bounding forward.

I would have been glad to have more company, but May stamped a hoof down in front of the two of them. "No." She stated flatly.

"Why not?" I asked, looking at May forlornly. My lazy eye chose that moment to wander, killing the impact of the look.

"Because this haven needs a leader," said May. "I'm just a medic, but you," she jabbed a forehoof at

Raider, “have experience dealing with tough situations. You're a soldier and a prison supervisor, and you know how to keep things in order. More than anything, survivors that come here will need that. Order.”

“I suppose,” muttered Raider. He chuckled derisively; “I probably wouldn't be much use to you anyways. I'm a lousy shot, and I never saw that much action. MoM put me to work as a Warden so they could send better soldiers to the front.” The green buck stepped back, apparently placated.

Gizmo on the other hoof, was still insistent. “What about me?” he demanded. “There's no reason for me not to go.”

“Actually, there is something you can contribute here,” remarked May. I listened intently; the young mare seemed to have a fair amount of wisdom. “You're familiar with Stable-Tec equipment, and you're a miracle worker when it comes to broken technology.”

“That doesn't mean much anymore,” said Gizmo, nonplussed. “Stable-Tec HQ was in Fillydelphia. It would have been wiped when the megaspell hit.”

“Precisely,” retorted May. “For all we know, you could be the only Stable-Tec engineer left on the surface.” She then gave him a pleading look; “We need to know if the rest of the Stables worked. If there's any hope for the future of Equestria, it's in those Stables.”

Gizmo looked unsure. I couldn't blame him; May was effectively asking him whether or not Equestria would even have a future. It was a heavy question. Gizmo looked up at her resolutely. “Alright then, I'll do it. I should be able to bypass the encryption on the-”

I stopped paying attention when Gizmo started spouting off a bunch of technical jargon, turning to face May. “We'll need to rest up for this trip. Even if I'm not pulling a cart this time, it's still going to be a long haul.”

“I would insist,” snorted May. “Ponyville to Manehattan is almost a week's trot.”

The following morning saw May and I ready to go. May had taken a pair of saddlebags from Redheart's clinic and stashed a fair amount of medical supplies in them. My bags, their supplies either used or handed off to May, now held what would hopefully be a week's worth of canned and boxed food. I was tempted to make a batch of muffins at the abandoned Sugar Cube Corner, but they would go stale too quickly. A pair of canteens hung around each of our necks. We didn't want to take more than we had to, especially since we planned to send more ponies back here. They would need as much food and water as they could get.

I had offered to fly May and I part of the way to Manehattan, but she had refused. While never an amazing athlete like Rainbow Dash or Scootaloo had been, I was still a fair flier. In my youth I could make the Ponyville to Manehattan flight in half a day. Though I was no longer a spring filly, years of hauling wagons had kept me in good shape, and I felt I could still make the trip, even with a passenger, in good time. When pressed on the issue, May insisted that she didn't want to put any more strain on

my addled body than was necessary. However, I could tell from the way she said it that there was something else. She was probably afraid of heights.

Just as we were about to leave, Gizmo ran up to us, levitating something along beside him. It was May's Pipbuck, which he had been working on all the night before. May held up her foreleg and allowed him to attach it with a firm click. "There we go," said Gizmo. He looked and sounded rather tired. "I also updated the OS; apparently yours was missing a couple of the newer features."

"Thanks," said May, lifting up the arcano-tech device to inspect it. She gave a stomp of her hoof and the screen flickered to life. It had the same soft green glow as the terminal from the Stable-Tec outlet. "I never really realized how much I'd been using this thing until it got fried."

"They're a marvel alright," remarked Gizmo. "Apple Bloom really outdid herself on them." Gizmo held up his foreleg, and I saw that he was also wearing a Pipbuck now, although his seemed to be slapped together from spare parts. "Oh yeah, I have one more thing for you."

Gizmo's horn lit up with a magical glow, and the holster that was at his shoulder came undone. He levitated the holder and the small firearm it contained over to May. She, a bit reluctantly, grasped it in her own field of magic. She removed the gun from the holster to inspect it.

I had seen guns before, but not one like this. It was a smaller gun, the kind that would be mouth held if the wielder didn't have magic to lift it with. It looked like a revolver, but the cylinder was completely enclosed, and the barrel looked to be dually reinforced. May popped it open, revealing that the chamber held five shots. A small gemstone on the back gave off a soft yellow glow. Apparently Gizmo's technical proficiency extended beyond Stable-Tec equipment.

"It's certainly impressive," remarked May, closing the cylinder again, "but I'm not sure I'll need it."

"Everything is really uncertain right now," asserted Gizmo. "I'd feel more comfortable knowing you had some way to defend yourselves if the need arises."

May nodded, accepting that the younger unicorn had a valid point. She secured the holster at her shoulder, then placed the gun snugly into it. "I'll bring it back," she promised.

"You'd better," smirked Gizmo. "That Gun is my baby. Tared her down from a .223 pistol, reinforced the cylinder and barrel to cut the recoil, then motorized the cylinder and crane for a faster reload and rate of fire. That little gem on the back even lets her synch up with S.A.T.S. for higher accuracy."

I didn't know what half of that meant, but it sounded impressive. May seemed to follow a little better, but still had a question. "S.A.T.S?"

"The Stable-Tec Arcane Targeting Spell," announced Gizmo proudly. "One of the newer features your Pipbuck was missing. Basically, it provides temporary assistance in combat by quantifying targeting vectors and..." Seeing the confused looks on our faces, Gizmo simplified his explanation; "It aims for you. With it and That Gun's enhancement, even somepony who's never fired a gun before won't be able to miss." As an afterthought, he asked: "You have fired a gun before, right?"

“Yes,” stated May a little hesitantly, “but only at a shooting range. I spent two years as a field medic before transferring to spell research. They made us learn basic firearm use.”

“You'll be fine then.” Famous last words.

With Gizmo's gifts now in May's possession, she and I made our way out of Ponyville. It was going to be a long trek to Manehattan on hoof, but May was confident that we could make it in under a week. That would have been a lot easier if she let me fly us some of the distance, but she was still adamant about staying on the ground. I laughed inwardly, amused that somepony who had been on a battlefield would be afraid of something as pedestrian as heights.

To pass the time on the long trip, we conversed with each other, mostly about what our lives had been like before the war, and what we hoped they could become now that the war was effectively over. It passed some time, but not nearly as much as we'd have liked. When we ran out of things to talk about, May turned on the radio built into her Pipbuck, tuning it to the MASEBS frequency. However, instead of hearing Magpie's usual broadcast, a different voice greeted us; that of a younger sounding stallion.

“Greetings everypony. As you can probably tell, I'm not Lieutenant Colonel Magpie. As of now, the MASEBS is under new management. My name is Turntable, and I'm just a civilian. However, I'm also the only other pony here who knows how to operate this equipment. My aunt showed me how most types of broadcasting and recording equipment work since I was a little colt.”

“Now then, as for why Miss Magpie is no longer here. An unfortunate situation has befallen us here at the Manehattan MAS hub, on top of the obvious. Although the magical defences of this building protected us from the brunt of the blast, what we didn't know was that a number of small holes in those defences were letting radiation leak into the tower. One of those holes was located here, in the emergency broadcast room. Unfortunately, by the time we realized this and fixed the problem, Magpie, as well as a few others, had already taken a fatal dose. I hope you all join me in a moment of silence for the brave mare who stayed up here, trying to bring you all the truth of this disaster.”

May and I stopped and bowed our heads, having shared a respect for Magpie and her attempts to reach out to what remained of Equestria. We stayed silent a few moments, only resuming our trek when the voice of Turntable resumed his broadcast.

“In her honour I will continue to bring you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts. This brings me to my next bit of news; Prance and Bitally have both been confirmed as having been destroyed by Megaspells. We still don't have any word about Canterlot or the Princesses, so if anypony out there is listening and can send us a message with that information, we would be eternally indebted to you.”

May and I shared a knowing, yet anxious look.

“Now then, as things look bleak, I remember something my auntie used to always tell me. My aunt's name was Vinyl Scratch, who many of you may have known as radio personality DJ P0N-3. She always told me that tough times were easier with good friends and good music. I don't know if I can be a good friend, since I'm stuck in the middle of a megaspell blasted city, but music at least I can do. I don't have

much of a selection, just some of my personal collection that happened to be here. I hope it helps."

Turntable's voice cut out, giving way to a song. I recognized it, as would just about anypony who listened to the popular music of the time. It was Sweetie Belle, beautiful songstress, face of public relations at Stable-Tec and, as Gizmo told us, now the Overmare of Stable Two. This song was a particularly sorrowful melody, and hearing it in the gloom of post-megaspell Equestria made my heart ache. The lyrics seemed eerily appropriate.

"How did this happen? What have I done..."

About two and a half days after departing from Ponyville, May and I found ourselves back in the proximity of the Pie family rock farm. We decided to stop in to check on Blinkie Pie, and also to refill our canteens from her well. When she first saw us, she jumped a good foot in the air. I couldn't really blame her; with our hair all but gone, May and I did look rather freakish. Thankfully it didn't last long, and we were able to stock up on water. We told Blinkie about our successful trek to Ponyville, and she was glad to hear it. Unfortunately, we still couldn't convince her to depart from the old rock farm.

We stayed the night at Blinkie's place before resuming our trek. Sleep, I found, didn't seem to do much for me anymore. I never seemed to feel that much better afterwards, and most of the time my sleep was riddled with horrible nightmares. May seemed to be the same, only sleeping a few hours at a time herself, but didn't mention anything to me. I suspected she was mentally berating herself for ignoring one of the most important parts of healthy living, being a medical pony through and through.

Another strange thing I found as we travelled was that hunger no longer seem to have the same pang as it used to. May and I had been eating sparingly to conserve the supplies we had brought with us, but for some strange reason it always seemed to be more than enough. That said, I would have given just about anything for a fresh muffin. The way things were, I felt I could get away with going a couple days before I felt like eating again. Whether that was actually true I couldn't say, as May also insisted on two daily meals, even if they were small.

Perhaps the strangest thing of all about our travels was, once again, the lifelessness of the once vivid nation of Equestria. Any plant life we came across was black, sickly or shrivelled, owing to the radiation and megaspell fallout. All animal life seemed to have ceased, or at the very least gone into hiding. Pony life as well, although given the number of places that had suffered megaspell hits, that was becoming less and less shocking. All together, the lack of life spooked me even more than the prospect of seeing death in front of me again. It was as though the land itself was sterile.

May's Pipbuck was constantly picking up background levels of radiation. Periodically the levels would spike, but never to the levels we had already experienced on the day of the apocalypse. As soon as that word crossed my mind, I shuddered. I really didn't want to think of that day like that. Really though, what else could I call it? Holocaust and doomsday fit, but they had the same problem.

Putting the thought aside, I pondered the minor radiation we were being exposed to. It felt nothing like the first day, when my insides had felt eight kinds of wrong and my head and stomach had been turning cartwheels. It felt a little like sitting in front of an open fireplace; cozy, but potentially dangerous if you

sat too close.

May and I had been following the rails along the countryside for the sake of taking the quickest, and presumably safest route to Manehattan. We ended up passing through a junction north of Shattered Hoof. This made me think of Raider, and wonder if anypony had been sent to investigate the stockyard yet. I doubted it. It was sadly more likely that the ponies inside had either escaped or died. There were also other, more horrible possibilities, but I didn't want to contemplate them.

Five days after leaving Ponyville, it turned out that background radiation exposure was indeed taking its toll on us. May and I started experiencing 'cellular necrosis of epidermal tissue', which was just her using medical terminology to say our skin was dying and flaking off. Although we hadn't been getting sick, May had each of us drink a packet of RadAway in an attempt to stave off the effects. It didn't work, as by the next day our skin was looking even worse, and I had lost a few more feathers.

After our skin started to decay, May and I quickened our pace towards Manehattan. As we drew closer to the city, we began to find corpses. Ponies that had died of burns or radiation poisoning after the blast of balefire destroyed the city. I thought back to the pegasus mare who I had seen dead after the Cloudsdale blast. I wondered why she had died when I, not a quarter mile ahead, had been spared. Was it luck? Willpower? Or, more likely, I was cursed to bear witness to these horrors.

May stopped abruptly as we came into the suburb of Fetlock. She looked around, as though she was searching for something. She fell to her haunches after a few moments and hung her head.

"What's the matter?" I asked, trotting up to her. I sat down next to her and placed a now featherless wing across her shoulders in a pseudo-hug.

"Somewhere in this suburb is Stable Twenty-Nine." Not the response I had been expecting. "I guess I forgot to mention this too," muttered May, sighing. "My brother and nephew were slated for a spot there. I was worried about them, knowing how dangerous the world was, but I had never actually considered a total megaspell holocaust to be possible until he told me about his acceptance."

Once again, I found myself painfully inexperienced in matters regarding family. No siblings, no children, not even status as an honorary aunt from friends' children. "Shouldn't you be glad then?" I asked, trying to be as supportive as I could manage. "If they're in a Stable, then they were spared all of this."

May shook her head and sighed again. "I slipped out of touch with Buckbright about a week before the holocaust. I was really busy; the MoP never stopped having ponies to heal and provide therapy for, and it only ever seemed to get worse. I don't even know if he and his son made it into the Stable. They might not have gotten the chance, given how suddenly this all happened."

"Is that why you were so insistent on having Gizmo find out about the rest of the Stables?" It made sense now that I thought about it, more so than just a general concern for those who would survive thanks to the Stables. There was something personal thrown into the mix.

May nodded, a few tears slipping from her eyes; “Yes. It seems a bit selfish, given how much everypony has suffered, but I just want to know that they're safe. If I could know for sure, I would have something to carry hope for. Those damn Zebras killed every other ounce of it I had.”

I added a foreleg to the wing I had over May's shoulder, drawing her into a hug. “Don't worry,” I said, again trying to comfort her, though with less than stellar conviction. “Equestria isn't going to stay like this. It may take a while, but we'll get back on our hooves.”

“I sure hope you're right,” sighed May.

May and I continued through the suburb of Fetlock, the skyline of the Manehattan metropolis looming up in front of us. The massive skyscrapers that comprised the city jutted into the air like great black bones. As we drew closer, corpses were replaced by skeletons, and eventually by piles of ash, incinerated down to the bone by the heat and sickly green flames of the balefire bomb. After the megaspell went off, the city was reduced to a shadow of its former self, blackened with the ash of countless cremated citizens. It also made May's Pipbuck click wildly at the radiation that had settled over the city.

Before going any further, May's horn lit up as she cast her reddish radiation shield around us. Almost immediately, the clicking in her Pipbuck died down, although it never completely silenced. We each drank another RadAway potion as a precaution, and May requested that I keep conversation to a minimum to avoid losing focus. I understood; not wanting to get cooked further by the radiation, but I did not enjoy the idea of a silent trip through the spooky ruins of a blasted city.

Thankfully, May didn't either, turning on her Pipbuck's radio at a low volume. We came into the tail end of that same song by Sweetie Belle. Turntable's selection of songs consisted of a dozen at most, and we had heard all of them at least a dozen times over on the trip here. However, Turntable always seemed to find bits of news to place between songs.

“That was Sweetie Belle once again. Sorry if it's starting to get old, but it's the best I can do. Now then, I've got a bit of news for you. I've been hearing rumours of ghosts here in the Manehattan ruins. Pony souls who have not yet realized they died in the blast, wandering the ruined city and trying to go about their former lives. Naturally, that notion is ridiculous, but there's something stirring down here that isn't.”

“A few witness accounts claim that zombie ponies have been spotted on the outskirts of Manehattan. They have the shape of ponies, but look like shambling corpses. Hairless, flesh rotten and vacant looking, these ponies really do seem like zombies from an old horror flick. Now then, what are they really? Ponies suffering from extreme radiation poisoning? Mutants?”

“Both,” sneered May. Her voice seemed a bit more gravelly than it had before, like she had a sore throat. I let out a soft chuckle, then continued listening to Turntable.

“Perhaps they're the result of some plague the Zebras have set upon us along with the megaspells. Or, and this one I doubt personally, maybe they really are undead ponies risen from the grave to take

revenge for their untimely deaths in the wake of the megaspell holocaust. Now then, while these ponies may look like monsters, none of my witnesses have reported any incidents of flesh or brain eating. That said, they could still be dangerous if they're radioactive or diseased. I recommend caution, but let's not get trigger happy here. This land has seen enough of that to last an eternity."

Turntable moved on to another topic, but it was far less interesting than his commentary on the so called 'zombies'. "Do you think he's talking about us?" I raised a hoof to my throat after I spoke. I also seemed to have some roughness affecting my voice.

"He could be," replied May, not saying anything about my voice, "but I doubt it. He said there were witnesses, but we haven't encountered anypony living since Blinkie Pie. More likely, I think there might be others suffering from this..." May paused, unsure of what to call our condition.

"Affliction," I offered, wanting to keep the conversation, and our movement into the city, going.

"I suppose that'll do for now." May pressed a contemplative hoof to her chin. "If there are others going through this, then I should see about coming up with a treatment. I thought it would only be temporary when it was just hair loss, but this..."

"Perhaps you can look into it at the MAS hub," I suggested. "Surely they have research... stuff there." I wasn't exactly sure what 'stuff' consisted of, but at least May got the point.

Walking through Manehattan was like traversing an urban maze. If May hadn't known the way, I would have gotten lost, having only even travelled through the city by air before. It was made all the worse by the fact that where once there would have been a thriving community of metropolitan ponies, there were now countless piles of ash. Small green fires still burned in a number of places. It didn't help that creaking metal and collapsing timbres made me jump, fearing that the weakened structures might collapse on us.

Even with May's warding spell, the further we went into the city, the more intense the radiation grew. My companion looked uncertain, as though she was regretting deciding to come out here. The glow from her horn would periodically intensify, trying to keep up with the rising radiation levels. It was a losing battle, and I feared that if we didn't reach the Ministry of Magic hub soon, we might end up joining the ash that billowed about the city. In a worst case scenario I might be able to fly out, but I wasn't sure I trusted my wilted wings to carry May along with me.

It seemed some small miracle that we managed to make our way deep enough into the city to reach the MAS hub. As we approached the monolithic building, I could see that it had not weathered the megaspell blast so well as I had presumed from the radio broadcasts. The side of the building facing the centre of the city, where the megaspell had detonated, was scorched black and sagging dangerously. I could just barely see the tip of a radio transmitter sticking out from the building's roof.

My lazy eye rolled down, catching several glints of brass beneath a layer of black ash. Looking up, I saw the name of the building on the front, although a number of the letters had fallen free. I suspected that was the source of the brass beneath my hooves.

M-nis--y -f A-can- Sc-en-e

Near the half demolished sign I could see that the tracks of a monorail running into a docking station built onto the side of the building. A few stories up from the track I could see a balcony, the railing of which was warped and half torn away. What was surprising was that there was a pair of ponies standing on it.

There were two of them, each wearing a bright yellow radiation suit with pink bands around the forelegs and a butterfly emblem on the flank. The suits were surrounded by a soft yellow glow. Between the two of them, a large rifle sat mounted to the remaining part of the railing.

“Well I'll be,” muttered May, drawing my gaze. She looked to be sweating from the strain of maintaining the radiation ward around the two of us. “Those are Ministry of Peace HAZ-MAT and Radiation suits. They've got built in radiation ward talismans. It's kinda making me jealous.”

I smiled anxiously. “Maybe they'll lend you one.”

“Maybe,” said May cynically, “but once we get inside and decontaminated, I'm not going anywhere for a while. I'm on the verge of burning out my magic.”

I thoroughly agreed. I hadn't just spent the past few hours maintaining a magical barrier, but I could tell the toll it was taking on May. I wanted her to get all the rest she needed and more. Sadly, it wasn't meant to be. My lazy eye rolled up of its own accord, landing on the balcony once more. It was just in time to see the barrel of the large rifle was now pointed straight at the two of us. A single shot rang out, echoing across the empty city.

Not having time to think, I rammed into May, shoving her away from the line of fire. Startled by the sudden push, May's horn flickered and died, the radiation ward around us vanishing in an instant. I didn't have much time to register the loss of our protection as the shot tore through my right thigh. A gaping hole was made right below my flank, searing with agony. May and I crashed roughly into an overturned metal cart. I screamed a terrible, inequine scream.

Footnote: Status Update!

Current Staus: Complete Ghoulfication.

Status Effect: Your ghoulish appearance causes most ponies to view and think of you as a monster. Your charisma is permanently reduced by three. However, your ghoulish physiology comes with a few unique benefits. Your perception, endurance and luck are permanently increased by one. As well, you can last without food or water much longer than regular ponies, and the benefits and duration of chems are reduced by half.

WARNING! As a ghou, your lucidity will now be monitored. If your lucidity drops below safe levels, you run the risk of turning feral.