"Holiday Road"

Every day is a gift.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
Exult O' shores, and ring O' bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

He stank twice as bad as a corpse, the addition of diesel fumes and sulphur made it somewhat bearable. For the second time, Curbstomp was dead by my actions, a bitter pill in a metal jacket to the forehead, dwarfing the hole of my previous prescription. The long-since retired Baker Barbarian's skull hardly resembled anything that could be part of a pony's anatomy.

The buck, when alive, had an aversion to soap that bordered on paranoia, accompanied by an unhealthy dose of aquaphobia. One time he did bathe, and that's because I said I'd give him a blow if he did. Color me surprised when he came in smelling only musky--Still didn't suck his dick, gotta have standards. He liked the kiss of consolation, though, so he started brushing his teeth at least once a week to try to get more. I missed those simpler times, when my biggest problems were the next big score or denying idiots access to my undercarriage. I'd give my left teat to go back a year, then I'd be content.

The poor bastard stood little chance against a well placed shot from the Compensator, splitting his carcass into two uneven, sparking chunks.

Shit. Everything was just shit. Let me recount the ways we'd been bucked sans courtesy reach around, shall we? House turned ash filled husk, my guy n' gal pals mostly misplaced or dead, and to make matters worse, to top that suck-shit off, my favorite arcade cabinet had the Compensator halfway through it. That damn recoil was a jackhammer, in my normal state of mind, I'd imagine mounting a fake dick on the stock and making good use of the recoil, but I was far from my normal state of mind.

"Yah still itchin' tah go find yer meal ticket, now?" Bitch Fit unwisely teased, standing abreast uncomfortably close. I shoved her away with a snort as I retrieved my cannon. Did she not see me skull bugger this thing with this 'fuck off' rifle? She had a major deathwish, and I had been wanting to polish her off for years. The timing had never been right...

“Got debts to pay,” I griped. “Not like you respect nothin’, Bitch.” Common sense urged me to dash out the door, if the deadmare had resources to spare for this, then Steelgraft was hilted raw. My maternal instincts twisted my horn to weather Bitch’s acidic smile a while longer. Had to check up on the kids first, Steelgraft wasn’t no two pump chump, he’d manage to hold on.

The former leader of the settlement where I once paid rent scoffed, turned her nose up, and rejoined her three skank-nurses. “Look, I appreciate him savin’ my fine keester,” She never appreciated anything, the liar, “but ain’t no sense going where that thing came from--He’s already dead.” She scrunched her nose, adding with a grunt, “you were late on rent this month.”

“Ash th’ rent, Bitch.” I snapped, working the stock of my gun back and forth until it popped free of the Dance Dance Pony arcade cabinet. All my high scores, gone forever, and there wasn’t another intact game like that in all of the Trot. Twenty-eight million, initials **GXS**, I made sure nopony took those initials off. Cost a ton of bits over the months...Small apples, big bushels, it’s the little things that really get me. She was really gone what little to remember her by vanished by the days.

Scattered, the other survivors were gathering together. So far, no dead bodies, and only minor injuries. Bitch Fit found laughter at the expense of Glazed Marshmallow, pinned between two arcade cabinets. The friendly Macitaur, the only one other than the Steel Ranger to not dive for cover, pried the cases apart to let the shaken mare squeeze free.

“MY ARCADE!” And it seemed Record Wrecker was unharmed, physically at least. That wasn’t saying much for the equity of her arcade. Her wild eyes peered through the smudged lenses of her aviator goggles as she dashed around in circles, her hooves laden with tattered paperwork in her futile attempt to take inventory. “MY EVERYTHING IS BROKEN! DON’T TOUCH ANYTHING!” She fled to the janitor’s closet, the only door in the building that wasn’t crooked before was now barely hanging on its hinges. It fell to the floor with a crash, “OH COME ON!”

“If only this place had been made with Stubbornite,” Said that one fat purple stallion, Indigo of Indigo’s Indestructibles, He tried to hawk his wares to the owner, offering to ‘rebuild the door’ with clipboards. He received a mop to the face for his troubles. “Perhaps now is a bad time, but next time, you mark my words, you’ll wish you had a Stubbornite door!” Did he ever quit? No, and from experience, I knew he hardly let an opportunity slip to make a sale. He was one of those special idiots that took no for an answer only if you’d buy something.

Giving the orange, panicked pegasus the dozen yards of hazard distance she needed, the (more sane)refugees began picking through their belongings and making sure everyone was at least kickin'. My assistance was limited to my own, the children first, two of which were already accounted for, Taffy and Shagrag were in the care of the neurotic hardly-mourning widower. I attributed it to the shock or denial. Frisky Fritter deserved gratitude, not that I'd risk showing it openly. I'll bother them later, I had two other scamps to find first. Rebel and that little Dirge filly. They were by the reward counter last I saw. The same reward counter that was a complete wreck with piles of rewards, guns, and various other valuables scattered about! Crud! I took one frantic step before I felt a pair of hooves on my haunches.

Glazed was a blubbering mess and her embrace was unwelcomed with a flailing foreleg of my own. I winced, drawing in pained breath as I was forced to rest weight on my crippled foreleg. The urge to kick welled up inside me and I nearly did, cursing under my breath as my eyes watered.

"Whoa nelly, you be chill now, understand?" I grunted, granting the briefest of affections, my heart quaking in my chest. "You're fine." While I calmed the shaken girl down, my eyes scanned the area for Rebel Riot and the little filly Keena had brought in. The hippogriff herself was circling around, searching for the two among the rewards booth's disarray.

"I see them!" Keena announced, pointing a helpful talon.

" 'Scuse me," I muttered, extracting myself from Marshmallow's blubbery, wet, sticky grip. I'm all for calming down some poor gal, but enough's enough. I flashed my horn and heaved her weight, dealing her ass first at the first available target, tossing her at the obnoxiously titanic steel ranger. "Comfort this!"

Distraction removed, I left Standtall failing to console an emotional mare and scrambled over the counter to wade through wooden splinters and singed plushie stuffing. I joined Keena in her efforts to uncover the shifting lump under the pile of prizes, giving my horn a rest by using good old fashioned pony power.

"Hey! I need to inventory those, don't break them!" Record Wrecker called over to me while she pointlessly swept up an aisle, she was missing the forest for the trees. Rolling my eyes, I regarded one of the split open plushies, a goofy grinning alligator without teeth, with a glare of contempt before throwing it at her.

"Everything's totalled," I sniped.

“You don’t have to make it worse!” Record babbled. “You still wanna borrow my gun, don’t you?” Her words made me recoil, my muzzle scrunching. With a bitter groan I rolled my eyes and began setting the prizes into heaps of ‘ruined’ and ‘salvageable’. One pile grew substantially faster than the other; Wrecker may need to stock up on more prizes if she ever re-opened.

“She’s serious?” Keena chirped. “She’s serious.” She answered herself glibly, still shoveling up prize plaques, half-melted rubber snakes, and false mustaches. You’d think Wrecker would run out of these stupid ten-ticket prizes, but she never did, she likely had crates of the worthless things in storage somewhere. “Couldn’t we just salvage the prizes later?” Keena asked.

Record Wrecker was adamant that the piles be segregated and not touching one another. With tandem sighs, we both chose to humor her with a half-hearted attempt to sift through the technicolor avalanche.

Whilst sifting through pencil toppers and name placards, a pristine grin beamed up at me framed in curly pink. I recognized it as the Pinkie Pie figurine that had once occupied the display case next to the Compensator, an adorable bauble with a steep price. How it escaped unscathed was a mystery, and even stranger, the words etched into the base where the pink pony stood. “Awareness! It was under ‘E’!” That made a lick spittle sense.

During my days in the bunker, under the oppressive gaze of my father, I’d done more than my fair share of “Approved” reading. Medical texts and great historical documents about the war. Of all the Ministry Mares, Pinkie Pie had been one of my least favorite to learn about, second only to Fluttershy. I pocketed that stupidly grinning figurine, figuring I could hawk it for caps and Record would be none the wiser, assuming it was lost.

My ear flickered and my nose itched. Twitch-A-Twitch.

“We’re digging in the wrong place!” I dove onto the pile of toys, ignoring Keena’s perplexed expression. “Here!” I tore the pile apart, unearthing the young treasures. Latent maternal instincts had honed my hooves into foal-seeking dowsing rods! Or something? Not really sure where the sudden inspiration to dig elsewhere had come from.

Rebel Riot was relieved to be discovered, even if he was rattling like a bag of caps. He had lain

across the slate gray dapple filly, likely having taken her to the ground to shield her with his body. He gave a thousand-yard stare right through me. Poor bugger'd been overwhelmed, he was suffering from Shellshock, so I handled him as delicately as I could. The filly beneath him, Dirge, was it? She looked awful, malnourished, sick, and bearing the beginnings of an awful infection to a gash along her side, the flesh around the wound oozing. I mentally kicked myself, wishing to just look away--I had not the time nor the resources to spare helping her right now. Why did I look? Why couldn't she have been older? I would feel less guilty if she were a decade older...

"Rebel, you're alright. And Dirge?" I felt happy and relieved, moving to embrace them both, only to slam into an invisible obstacle.

Growl! An ominous, gravelly sound, not unlike tacks in a blender. Good feelings gone!

Snaking curls of smoke rose up from a three legged strider that revealed itself, prostrate before the children and scored with a half-dozen shrapenel wounds. Blood pooled in my mouth, I hadn't felt the sting of pain, but only noticed that I had bitten my lip hard when I tasted copper. The rush of the previous fight rose up to tax my aching muscles with adrenaline, my body acted before I'd fully caught onto the situation. Compensator's leg-length buck-knife bayonet settled between the cursed thing's eyes.

"Back off," I hissed, narrowing my eyes. My horn flickered, the safety clicked, the trigger flexed. "Now." Why didn't I just blast its head through its body? Simple--The recoil was a bitch, the kids were too close, and the ammo for this damn thing was scarce! Oh, was I pleased as pecker pie when it shuffled into a modest retreat, gulping at the air as it made pathetic attempts at words.

"No..." Croaked the sickly little filly. "Be a good girl..."

Was she talkin' to me? Nope. The Strider backed off, heeding the call of her...Owner? Was this busted up reject a hacked model? I couldn't tell, but typically, these things never removed their masks, so seeing its face lent to its equinity. It looked like a female version of Steelgraft, maneless, hornless, but with those same, striking blue eyes. I caught its gaze and I saw a glimmer of something deep. The eye is the window to the soul, they say, I don't buy into that crap, but I could tell, easily, that it had some deeper understanding. Then it had to go and ruin it by saying something.

"Gan-Glee." It said dumbly. Did the fugling just call me gangly? I was slender, spry, and lithe, not gangly! Smart mouthed bean can! Lucky that churchmouse Hippogriff and foal had vouched. It was protecting the filly. Why? Buck, kiss a gift horse on the mouth, get bit. Don't question little blessings.

Even as I stayed violence, I felt the judgemental gaze of Miss Pragmatic Perfect over my shoulder. Keena retreated a modest distance when the bayonet came an inch too close as I stowed the massive thing back over my shoulder.

"Curbstomp, is he...He's..." Rebel was making use of his fancy large vocabulary.

"He's dead," I reassured him, finally embracing him now that the Strider was well out of the way. "And the Strider," I shot a death glare at the docile beast, waving my gun at its general direction, "Knows better than to cross momma."

Rebel sat up, moving off his charge to glance about. "The place is trashed." Always the astute observer, this one. A shiver rolled across his body. Heat was draining from the arcade through the gaping doorway, into the frigid night outside. Dirge began shivering now that Rebel wasn't keeping her warm. She complained wordlessly, whimpering as she curled up into a tight circle. If Fritter wasn't already searching for a blanket, I'd be stuck doing that next.

"Yeah, but it ain't so bad. Find some meds for Dirge N' keep her warm. Help with clean-up after, if yah can." My thoughts drifted to Record Wrecker battling a monolithic mess wielding nothing but a dust pan, a broom, and her signature, determined puffed cheeks. Shame we hadn't all escaped the raid without losing something. While coyly lidding my gaze and chuckling, I added, "And I don't mean sitting on her. You know, unless she doesn't mind you gettin' cozy on her."

Rebel scrambled up, blushing from front to back, "Ah, s-sorry! I ain't disrespectin', honest! I was protectin' yah!" He stammered, all while making my chest swell with pride. He was a good kid, I hope I had somethin' to do with that.

Dirge only laughed, tapering off into a weak cough. "Thankyou. A-and it's fine. It hurt when you knocked me down, but not as bad as getting blown up." With Rebel's help, she was able to stand, but she had to rest most her weight on him. Rebel toughly bore her weight.

"Gangrene, you're not gunna get fragged an'..." He gulped, "Come back, are yah?"

Discerning what he meant punctured my swelling chest, letting out all the gathered pride as a sallow sigh. Didn't wanna think about that none, dying and ending up like stinkass. I should of made sure to bury him or torch his corpse, no time to do so. No eulogy either. The only thing keeping me from

breaking down at the very thought of hosting a mass funeral of my friends or coming back like Curbstomp and hurting my kids was watching Record Wrecker's futile attempt to escort the bedraggled Strider out the front door with a broom like an unwanted stray.

"Out! You're cutting up my carpet, out!" Record Wrecker bawled, smacking the thing upside the head, her provocative antics went ignored for the first half dozen wacks. When the three-legged killing machine had enough, it scaled one of the nearest walls(leaving massive scorch marks in the once cheerful murals) and hung from the ceiling. Record Wrecker's broom swings came up a foot short, one wing flapping while the other strained in its sling. Angrily, she spiked the broom and then her straw hat.

She had bigger things to worry about, but I empathized with her desire to get that Deadmare out after that Roamer brought the boom. I had bigger apples to slice, and growing piles to mind, her problems seemed miniscule compared to mine, so she'd be on her own to deal with them.

"Don't worry, it won't happen. I'll watch her back," Keena assured. I had almost forgot she was there.

I nodded, with a flippant roll of my eyes, before turning to Rebel. "Just in case," I added, drawing the small .38 special I'd neglected to return to Steelgraft, "You'll have this. Just be sure to save a bullet for yourself--" I stopped there, unwilling to finish my thought. In training, my father always told me to save one bullet for myself. If you were unable to escape capture or suffering, that single bullet was a gift. Distancing myself from my father's shadow, I amended my statement, "If anything tries to hurt you, point it and bite." I set him up a box of ammo, leaving him with a paltry sum of ten rounds. Six loaded, four in reserve.

Rebel paled, his pastel blue face turning nearly an eggshell opaque, his eyes locked on the loaded firearm. Gingerly, he received the stock in his open mouth. For somepony that loved fixing boomsticks or playing with dangerous things, he was a bit gun shy--It probably had something to do with how his father died. I had planned to teach him how to shoot using Ol' Gil, my shitty old Varmint Rifle, when he grew another hand taller, but it was time to set aside foalish things. It was time he got his first gun, even if it was stolen!

"Hmph...Hrrr rumph mph..." Mumbled my little tyke bomb.

"Don't clop around or you'll shoot your eye out," I advised, leaving the colt unattended with the loaded weapon. I wouldn't win any mother of the year awards, but you do whatcha can.

I spent little time scraping together some necessary supplies. Extra shells for the Compensator, a few improvised bandages, and of course, Steelgraft's saddlebag, which was in Frisky Fritter's possession. If only things were easy, but this ain't candyland.

"No," Said Frisky.

"What didja just say?" I demanded sourly.

The crippled stallion was refusing to give me Steelgraft's bag. His bloodshot, beady eyes were filled with trepidation and worry. "Ah ain't givin' it tah yuh."

"Like hell you aren't," I bayed, anger rising with my voice. The stallion raised his stump and shushed me before waving the flipper to the blanket bundles of fitfully sleeping foals. Okay, so yelling at the moron was woefully out of the question. Bastard picked a poor time to be greedy, you don't screw around with a bandit--We fight dirty. My horn flickered, straining to ignite as a headache swam to the center of my forehead. Quivering, I lifted the duct taped sack off his back. Fritter leapt up and bit down on it, tugging it back.

"Nnnnn!" He grumbled stubbornly.

"That ain't yours," I reminded him. "Let go now n' I'll give you a bargain--You get to keep most your teeth!"

What a sight it must have been, the arcade wrecked, refugees huddled together to stave off the cold, and in the center, two ponies fighting over a duct tape reinforced bag of trinkets. We were less than gentle, yanking hard back and forth, until the bag split with a sick rip, spilling its contents. Frisky dove over the pile, scooping as much as he could underneath him.

Ding! There goes my patience. I was on him like ugly on his ass stamp, boxing his ears with my hooves. This beat down would continue until his stupid was reduced to acceptable levels, or until somepony peeled me off, the latter more likely. Whooping happily, Bitch Fit cheered me on, nearly waking the foals. Oh, so she wanted some too, did she? I was so punch drunk that I failed to notice the immense shadow looming until a twin pair of massive steel hooves stripped me from the stupid stallion.

“This nonsense stops,” Stated the steel ranger, “Now.”

I wasn’t gonna argue with something over three times my size, so the hooves stopped swinging, but a final insult left my lips in liquid form and struck the bloodied Frisky Fritter. “Next time, I reunite you with Zon--” That cruel phrase caught in my throat and left as a wheeze, metal pressing down on my back as I met the floor roughly.

“I won’t repeat myself,” growled the grizzled veteran.

CRACK! The Steel Ranger toppled sideways into a gaming cabinet, splintering it into a sparking mess. “Pick oan someain yer ain size, ye ruddy metal buckit!” Blathered the minotaur, one-handing his large rocket maul.

“That was unwise,” the ranger, Standtall, lived up to his namesake and stood a few inches taller than the minotaur, once he shuffled out from the arcade cabinet’s remains.

“Bein' a cowahrd's oonwise, specially roon a Mmmacitaur!”

“Do not let my calm demeanor,” Standtall began, calmly, until his voice broke, “Deceive you, cow. I am not in the mood to be called a coward.” He didn’t yell, instead, his voice grew sharp, more stern and cold. I’d heard plenty of voices like that, and generally, it meant somepony stepped in it big time.

“Ye interrupted a spat,” The bull snorted derisively, his disgust palpable on his heavy lips. “Ye choose fi’ets nae weel fittin' yer size, whit ah coward's folly.”

“I have no idea what you just said, but I feel I should be offended,” Said Standtall.

“Aye,” Affirmed the Macitaur, steam curling out of his nostrils. “Baha, yah moooof, Hauld me hammer, aam hammin' heem knuckled.” Handing off his comically - impractical hammer, the spotted goat struggled to drag it away from the potential fray.

Taffy stirred, and with arguing and fighting going on all around, began to cry--Shag Rag soon followed, rudely awoken, the otherwise street-wise colt began to sniffle. Up an at ‘em, faster than me, even on three hooves, Fritter, the punched stupid buck spun about, stumbling to address the crying foals. Unable to quiet them, he turned his ire upon the two largest creatures in the arcade.

“Carn sarn’it yah gits,” Frisky cursed. As angry as I was, Frisky was unmatched, his frothing lunacy pushed his small frame between the two titanic beasts. “Ain’t happenin’! Ya’ll ain’t fightin’ ahn she ain’t leavin’ neither!” He declared with gusto.

“That ain’t your choice to make, half-wit,” I quipped, levitating the supplies into my own saddlebag. I had to make a bit of room, and most of the things in the bag seemed like junk to me. Old journal pages, poetry and scribbles(The quillmare-ship looked eerily reminiscent of a certain tophat wearing ghoul’s), why would Steelgraft hold onto crap like this? It’d find a home balled up in a rubbish bin if it wasn’t already so neatly organized onto a clipboard. If anything, this confirmed a number of my suspicions about him--Zone and Fritter had confirmed another. Everything was steadily adding up, and my reasons for wanting to *save* Steelgraft multiplied.

I would make sure Star’s sacrifice would not be in vain.

Stone-faced, or the equivalent since he wore a helmet, Standtall loomed over the diminutive donut-baker. In my mind, I imagined him stomping the eyesore into the carpet like a cast-off fag. “You have no authority here, citizen.”

Ding! There goes my bell of patience, tolling again. “Neither do you,” I growled dangerously, horn flickering with cold indecision on whether to pick up the old crumpled box fastened with twine or to take hold of the Compensator and deform that oversized salad-bowl he called a helmet. “Drop the ‘tude or I toss your salad.”

“...You can’t handle the recoil.” Standtall replied firmly.

I motioned to the remains of the Roamer in the doorway, “Didn’t stop me before, but you’re right, I’ll have to find a bipod. Maybe after I’m done ventilating your corpse, I’ll pry your legs off and use those?” I wasn’t making any friends.

“You know,” Indigo promptly appeared, winding up with a sales pitch, “We could make a

rudimentary bipod with enough clipboards--" I escorted the fat stallion from my sight with the barrel of the Compensator, shooting him a trigger-happy scowl. "Another time then!"

I expected the Minotaur to weigh in with the rest of the peanut gallery, but he was being cowed by an irate Record Wrecker who found him to be a much easier target than her last.

"Ach! Ooo! Mmmmnf! Lass, wot's yer problem? Gonnae-no 'at! Mercy!"

"No, no, no! You do not horse around! Do you understand me? I don't care how big you are, mister!" **Whack!** Record Wrecker was in the foulest mood ever seen, punctuating every word with a crack of her broom. Normally, she's cripplingly shy and very easy to bring to tears (Unless on a gaming binge)--But damn is she ever spicy when angry, and she's allergic to stupidity in its most sincere form; males. Record chased the ducking minotaur off, herding him to the janitor's closet. Moments later, only the minotaur returned, adorned in a pink, frilly apron much too small for him and holding a broom in his single hand, rather browbeat.

"Ach, wit'ah firecrackah." He breathed. His goat companion bleated in agreement around a dust pan he noisily chewed.

"And don't you DARE fire that gun inside here again, Gangrene, I've got more pink aprons!" Record Wrecker shouted from far back in the arcade. Her tone made me wince, buck, she was in a green apple mood.

Standtall stood silently, but I swear, I heard him chuckling under his breath.

"Fine, you guys suck anyway," I neighed, levitating up the twine-fastened box only to have Frisky plant his single foreleg down upon it like an invader staking territory with a flag. I rolled my eyes, shrugged my shoulders, and turned away. It wasn't my shit anyway, not like I needed it! If it was important, Steelgraft would get it back himself. "Come on Keena. Best get moving."

Keena was where she shouldn't be, making time to console the still-in-shock Glazed Marshmallow. Seems Standtall failed to fit the bill, no surprise there. Tartarus below, I didn't even have the time to comfort my own, yet she made time for complete strangers, and a whore at that! Not that I disliked whores and strippers, but typically, Eternites looked down upon those who sold their bodies, even out of necessity. Keena was an oddity among their ranks, and not just because she was a Hippogriff.

“Where are you going, Gangrene?” Said Taffy from the blanket covered bench, rubbing tears and fitful sleep from her eyes. “Why are the big ponies so mad?”

“She’s abandoning you,” Frisky answered her, which only sprung more confusion into the little filly’s eyes. Shag-Rag followed suit, giving a sputtering cough as he tried in vain to choke back the swelling tide.

“W-what?!” They bawled.

Ding! These clowns were driving a train-sized rut-piston through my patience hole, working it over hard. The case-worker in my mind wanted nothing more than to break that damn ringer against Frisky’s skull. Without thinking, I lunged, my hooves coming just short of Frisky’s bloodied face as I swung them in fury.

“I’ll kill you, you dumbass! You’ll leave a dumb corpse and get pecked at by dumb birds!”

“Calm down, Gangrene! There’s no need for such violence!” Keena squawked. Where was she a minute ago when I was square dancing on his face?

“Oh, if you kill him, could I get his corpse?” Called Key from nearby, licking his lips free of something sticky. The twins had returned from a rather long bathroom break. Together. Do the math. Or don’t. *Oh crotch-tits, bleach all the bathroom stalls!* You never know what Key has or what he may have given his poor, seemingly more ordinary twin brother. Ordinary being a loose term when applied to the mirrored earth-pony twins.

“Not now, brother, we’re getting to the climax,” Spoke Lock crisply.

“I thought we already did,” Bemused Key.

“Seems we missed something big,” Lock hummed.

“The big thing is over there,” Key added. “It’s dead.”

“It appears to be Curbstomp.” Lock shrugged.

“No wonder I have no interest,” Key chimed, “He’s disgusting.” (Pot, meet kettle.)

The twins went back and forth as they always did, commenting on things with their dim tones. They once held short lived jobs as announcers for the Big Top’s fortnightly beat-down, a brawl where the fighter with the most wins at year’s end would get a ticket to challenge the owner of the Double-Beatdown Casino in New Pegas. Shame I never won enough fights, and shame they lost their job for frequent “Bathroom Breaks”.

I always entertained the notion that Frisky Fritter was a lecherous plot-hole that beat his wife, but never had I seen him raise a hoof, or lack thereof, at her or any other mare. He must not consider me a proper lady, because he hit me like any stallion would hit another, full on and without reservations. His stump split my lower lip near one of my piercings and would have knocked me flat on my ass if Keena hadn’t been holding me.

“Sit the buck down and shut it, yah stingy bitch!” Frisky scowled. “Let meh be perfectly clear. Ah don’t lahke yah, not one bit.”

Oh, how would I ever sleep at night? Quite well after I shot him and tossed his corpse into a dumpster, the stupid git!

“But the wool can’t be pulled over mah eyes, Ah know the kindah pony you really are.” He continued, uninterrupted. “Yah didn’t give two plops about that old robo-ghoul before. Mah wife had tah save him--You only cared about cher own! Mah...Mah wife...” Her sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“What, are we sharing our feelings? Here’s mine--She could have done better--” I pointed a hoof at Fritter, “Screw you,” I pointed at Standtall, “And...you!” I paused at the minotaur. “That apron looks good on you.” My outburst, sadly, went mostly ignored, with only the creepy twins snickering at my usual behavior.

“Yah told him yah wish yah never met him!” He shouted. “Ah know it! We all heard it! Thas why ah kin’t letcha go! Even if it kills meh, even if ahm the only one that says it! If you go, you die an these kids become somepony else’s problem! Personally, ah ain’t give two caps about yah, but ah ain’t trustin’ yer character. Yah said it yourself, the Captain was ah bad investment. What’s worth dyin’ for now? Did somethin’ change, or did nothin’ change at all?”

Bucking noser! “I dunno, asshole, was it a good investment? We finally got somethin’ in common!” I pulled away from Keena, shooting her a scrunched glare, daring her to touch me again. “People we loved went six feet. Doornail. Cold. All for what? For...For-” I grit my teeth, “An unkillable errand boy?!”

There was pain in Frisky’s eyes, “Then why r’ yah keepin’ on, if yah feel this way?”

He was seeing right through me! Credit where it’s due, he was sharper than I expected. Keep your head down and mind your own business, most were happy to do that. Clean snouts don’t scrunch, the saying goes. This asshole never learned that lesson, his snout was lined with scrunch-scars.

“The same reason you are, Frisky.” I spat on the ground, turning tail for the exit. “I’m seein’ this to the bitter end.” Dwindling were the things I had to remember the love of my life. The Dance Dance Pony game broken, our initials lost forever. All that remained were her dogtags and her legacy; Her investment into a better future for all Detrot and debt paid to the tophat adorned pegasus aptly named Nevermore. I’d had my suspicions, but now I knew for certain what Steelgraft was. He was left to me by Star Racer, a weapon worth a fortune that I couldn’t sell. Who would buy him now that Hades was targeting him?

“She could have just left us a fat pile of caps,” I thought. Some inheritance this was, foal-sitting the amnesiac enemy of the most powerful being in all of Detrot. How much would Hades give me for him? *”Kidding, kidding, sorta kidding.”* Star Racer wouldn’t like it, but honestly, the thought did pass now and again, to cash out and move on.

With Keena abreast, I planned to leave these problems behind for a host of new ones. Steelgraft better appreciate this, and he better not be too screwed up or he wouldn’t be worth much! Damnit, I still couldn’t pawn him off once I got his contract annulled! Skipping out on such a score, one that could get us passage out of Detrot was a waste. Opportunity was knocking and I had to answer, then again, that nagging mare in my mind, the one calling itself a conscience, reared its morally obligated hooves to crush my selfish dreams.

We tread past the Roamer formerly known as Curbstomp. I recalled shedding a tear for him, not even I knew if they were disingenuous. I loved my kids, but that's all I could care about anymore, that's all the love I had left in my jaded, cold heart. Everypony else was a means to an end, acquaintances with varying degrees ranging from good for a fight to good for a rut.

"Goodbye, Curbstomp." I whispered faintly so no-one could hear. Curbstomp's lights were off, nobody was home, he was gone, and that monster was wearing his head. I just--Maybe he wasn't all gone, he'd missed his shots. Deadmare were known to be accurate. We should all be dead, the arcade should be vaporized. Was it intentional? Had there been a ghost in the machine? He could have had his revenge, it was my fault he died in the first place.

Why couldn't it just be black and white? I was a bandit, I should be bad, the wastes should have crushed every ounce of decency out of me as I struggled to survive. One standard, one limit to what I'd never do; a line. No children, no mothers, and I'd take in foals--Maybe I was what passed for a good pony now.

"No, Gangrene, you're a bad pony," I thought bitterly.

"Do not give credence to their words, I know you to be a good mare, Gangrene," Keena chirped, staying alongside me as we crested over the fallen Roamer to breach the cold night. So naive, but she never had reason to believe me to be deceitful. Every time we had worked together it was in my best interest to play nice and even those times were few in number. Still, I didn't like her--Not personally, seeing her pray or make generalizations about great happenings as '*challenges*' from the gods grated on my rebellious nature. If they existed, who were they to challenge me? To judge me? Buck em'.

"The gods test those they love most, Gangrene," Keena would always say. To which I would always wish that the gods would love us all less, if that was the case. Divinity in question was their nature, if they had such power that Keena claimed, then why would they allow evil? If they had power, yet refused to balm the wounds of the land, why call them good? I chose to believe they didn't exist, and with that, coupled disdain for the Eternites.

"Yah hardly know me, Keena," I sighed, leaving behind two bawling foals who felt abandoned--At no fault of my own. "You give me too much credit."

"So, that's your plan. A single Hippogriff, a hoof-full of supplies, and a rifle you can't even fire

accurately.” Standtall’s voice accompanied heavy, metallic hoof-falls and his fifty pound shadow across our backs.

“Hearing it like dat makes it sound like a bad plan.” I mused carelessly.

“Because it is,” Agreed the Steel Ranger. “Your idea to use me as a bipod was not.”

“Are you saying I get to take your legs?” I asked, a cruel grin flashing across my jaw as I turned to face the towering ranger. I must be nearing that special time of the month where I bled for about three days, because damn was I bloodthirsty!

“I’m saying you’re not the only ones with vested interest in the fall of the Warlord and his Deadmare Ringleaders.” Standtall growled deeply in his chest.

“Cut the gas, jack, and get to the blow,” I addressed, cutting through the middle man to get to the meat of the issue. “You want blood for blood, I dig that. I respect that--But what are you proposing?”

“Mount the anti-machine rifle to me, use me as a mobile bipod,” Standtall offered.

“You’d like that,” I accused, pointing a hoof at the tech-thieving bucket head. “You’d run off with that gun and go back to your cock sucking mili-tard friends!” In my mind, every Steel Ranger was nothing more than a tech-hoarding family of hobgoblins piled into fat cans. Then again, I knew what was under any armor, and that was just another fallible, selfish, worthless failure of a pony like every raider or *‘Friend’*.

“You’re going out to help that stallion,” Standtall said certainly. “I need to get a statement from him to finish my report on this incident. Elder Haywire would like to meet this VIP from Phillydelphia.”

It wasn’t the fact I couldn’t trust him, it was the opposite. He couldn’t trust me as far as he could throw me, and given his size, he could hurl me a city block at least. This cheap tapestry of lies I’d carefully weaved was winding into a noose, and there was plenty of it there for me to dangle. Skepticism drawn across my face, I shared my concerns with Keena(leaving out the fact I lied to him a bunch), she was as usual, the irresponsible good cop to my irresistibly sexy bad cop. Keena mentioned her weight limit would be at its limit with my svelte badonk alone. She didn’t humor me when I suggested flapping

her talons in junction with her wings.

“Alright, you’re in, you get no loot n’ you best not slow us down, pack mule!” I grinned. Standtall agreed to my reasonable terms with a silent nod. We saddled him down with most of our heavy stuff, keeping only what we couldn’t live without if he fell too far behind. Well, that wasn’t necessarily true, I did mount the Compensator to his armor, on the center mounting bracket so the barrel was aligned with the metal fin between his ears. His auto-mounter was broken, so it had to be done manually, leaving all manner of jokes to be expelled at his expense. “I bet you love getting manually mounted by a mare,” Being among my top five.

“You sound like Silver Tongue,” rumbled my stupid metal steed.

“Shut up, stupid metal steed!” I barked, adjusting the sights and stock to comfortably sit atop the Steel Ranger. “Hey, Keena, you be my spotter, alright? I’m gonna stay here and wear out my welcome,” Said I with glee, my ass pressed to searing cold metal, sending shivers up my spine. A guilty pleasure with every step, bucking firm metal into my unmentionables.

“That’s the scratch, awwww yeah!” I thought, leaving a line of drool along my stock.

Not half way down the road, a crash heralded the fall of heavy cloven hooves, and the emergence of the one-armed minotaur tailed by his goat companion. “Wa’et!” He hollered, closing the distance with a good fifteen foot skid. The apron hung from his chest by a single strap and his dopey goat friend wore a mop bucket on his head. “Bide, a’am comin' wi' ye!”

“Wouldn’t you rather just stay back?” Keena chirped with a worried tone. “You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

Saying this only made the splotched minotaur pale, likely a symptom of hypovolemia, his eyes glazed with a haunted look, ears flicking as they caught wind of a frustrated cry from Record Wrecker.

“Get back here, you have to clean up your mess!” Came the call of the rage-enthused mare. She stood at the exit of her arcade, screaming at the minotaur about personal responsibility.

“Eh'd raither die in battle than weaither 'er wark.” He said while stripping himself of the pink

burden. The goat began to chew the mop bucket earnestly.

"Fine, fine!" I huffed, pointing ahead, "If nopony has any objections, take point and start running."

Angus, the Macitaur, hesitated before shaking his head hard, shouldering his hammer. "We'll brin' up th' rear. Ah ainae keen oan gettin' in front ay 'at gin efter losin' me cranker." He gave Standtall a terse, angered glare, seething a huff through bared teeth.

Dumbstruck, I shrugged, "Whatever." No sense even trying to understand him, I wouldn't have to deal with him long. Safety in numbers, even the one-armed minotaur would prove useful if he could still fight half as good as he used to. As for his goat, he was too stupid to die, as was the case with most doe-eyed beasts of burden. Like Steelgraft.

"Can we get going?" Keena asked from up high, cupping a talon over her beak. "I don't want to be caught in a storm!"

"You heard her!" I growled, rapping my hoof against Standtall's side quickly. "Giddy up-up!" He merely 'hmmmed' in response and went into a sudden gallop, nearly bucking me off. It took all my strength to hold on as his long stride ate up distance at an incredible pace. How something so big could move so fast was astounding, but he was a shock trooper, fast and durable and not much else. Mobility and firepower wins battles.

Our relatively diverse, dysfunctional party wasn't destined to last, our dislike for each other stayed only by our dislike of a mutual enemy. We'd split up after this, as was typical with alliances in the wastes.

What's this? It's...Alive? I thought we died! Oh goodness, I'm so overjoyed! And...Are we doing this from the perspective of Gangrene? Oh! There's more to come? Oh, it's so fun following a narrative with a character bringing more than two brain cells to the task.

As overjoyed as I am to see this, I see a total party wipe as inevitable.

You know, being a companion, you don't get EXP, but...You know what? Here. Here's a song, for you. Now go get that unicorn!

Holiday Road by Lindsey Buckingham

All glory to Calbeck, my other Proof Readers and Fans! The story is back and is scheduled for more regular updates, I promise.

O’ Captain, My Captain BY WALT WHITMAN--Used without permission.
