

Silver Alone

"Life before death, strength before weakness, journey before destination"

I took another step.

The weight on my back was huge, pressing down on me, and I could feel my legs shake when I stopped.

So I took another step.

Maybe this wasn't the time to carry the weight. A building had just dropped on my head. But I took another step regardless.

I stopped. My legs shook and my back ached, but I needed to see it again. I looked back towards the city. Towards where The Moon once was, only to see a gaping hole and a pile of rubble. It was like when you lose a tooth, and your tongue can't stop poking at where it once was, it was hard to look at the city without The Moon there. I gritted my teeth and turned to keep on walking.

I took another step.

Platinum Haze was lying unconscious on my my back, her wings dragging across the ground as I walked. On top of her was Flare. I think he might have been conscious, but he only spoke in pained groans.

I took another step.

It could be worse. I was able to console Serenity and get her moving, and it wasn't like Flare was fully suited up in his Enclave gear. So there was that going for me. And Flare was lighter without his wing...

I shuddered, then took another step.

I guess it was inevitable. I had always thrown myself into the action, taking stupid risk after stupid risk and more often than not it hurt. Sometimes pieces of me fell away, but I still kept getting up because I could take it. But for Flare... he went into danger with me time and time again, and I couldn't protect anyone.

I took another step.

My pipbuck ticked and ticked as we kept moving. I looked up at the destination. The Black Salamander... It was sacked I heard. The Revolutionaries took the place, and House was dead or worse. But it was where we needed to go. It was partially immune from the new blanket of radiation, and it had facilities. The kind we needed, that Flare needed.

I took another step then opened the door.

"Home, sweet home." I muttered under my breath, taking in the carnage. The building was completely empty, save for corpses that littered the casino floor. What had once been a camp for the entirety of the BS' staff was turned into a battle ground, ravaged and blood soaked. I knew people here, Pearly... I shut my eyes and looked away from the carnage. We couldn't rest there. Still...

I kicked the door shut and the ticking in my pipbuck stopped.

I kept walking. The weight on my back didn't get any lighter, but it felt like some of it was gone. To my right I could see the pit that BS used to be famous for. The High Rollers table was at the very bottom, and each ring upwards was slightly less expensive until you got to the top, like a reverse pyramid. Though the last time I saw it, it was filled with supplies. Now the supplies were gone, and the pit was filled with crushed glass and the remains of the chandelier that used to hang over it.

"You should have let Molly help," Serenity said from beside me.

"I can carry them." I said sternly as my eyes fell to the old ticket booth with the door wide open. They could rest there as I searched the rest of the casino for... well, House. There was no way it could be completely empty, and I needed a cybernetics expert for Flare...

"You're hurt." Was I? I just felt numb.

"I can carry them." I repeated as I took another step. It would have been easier if a building hadn't just fallen on me, but another two could have and I still would have carried them. And I would have carried Serenity too, but she insisted on walking. "Molly has to get to her hotel... She put the map on my pipbuck. It's fine." If only we could trust Molly...

We entered the ticket-booth and I carefully placed Flare and Platinum Haze on the ground.

Flare was... bad. He looked impossibly pale, and was sweating so much his mane was sticking to his face. Serenity managed to bandage up his wound and stop the bleeding somewhat, but the bandages had become red with blood and the bit of bone that was still there was sticking up grotesquely. His eyes were half open, and his mouth was moving, but it was incoherent mumbling before his mouth closed again.

Haze fared somewhat better, her coat was fine if dirty from that whole building fiasco, and her horn sparked from time to time. The worst was her wing, the one that was still injured from that ghoul, and made worse by overuse back at the canyon. It was twisted... oddly, like the bone broke and... I shuddered. At least it was still there, but it was not good.

"Serenity." I looked down at her. "Watch over them."

She looked up at me, near to crying, her grey eyes large. "Momma..."

I rested a hoof on her head, "You're strong. I just..." I took in a deep breath. "Flare needs help. I need to find help for him. But there could be danger still. So I need you to watch over them. I won't be gone long. Be brave for me?"

She gave a little nod so I leaned down and kissed her cheek.

I left the ticket booth and as soon as I did, I heard Serenity lock the door behind me. She would be safe there, I was sure. Nobody knew she was there, they were hidden, and it was locked. I had to keep reassuring myself, because I hated to leave them.

Still... they needed help, so I had to find it. Somehow.

Could House really be dead? It seemed so... impossible. He had been alive for so long that he was less a pony, and more a force of nature. The kind of force that weathered all storms... the metaphor really didn't hold up to scrutiny, but it still felt weird thinking that he could be... gone.

As I trudged through the bloodied halls of the BS, weaving my way around toppled slot machines and broken blackjack tables, I couldn't help but feel a sense of guilt. My eyes passed over the few corpses that littered the casino (not as many as I had thought, but I guessed many fled and then came back to bury loved ones. Maybe). I couldn't help but wonder if I could have saved them if I'd stayed with House. Maybe it wasn't my job to protect them, it hadn't even been my job when I'd worked for House, I still felt like I could have done *something*.

I shut my eyes and looked away from the corpses. There were enough weights on my back, I could not afford to add the deaths of ponies I had never met. Acting for the future was more important than playing

guessing games about the past. Even as I tried to convince myself that, I could not help but feel a tightness in my gut.

I let out a sigh of relief when I finally reached the elevator. Then a sigh of annoyance when nothing happened when I pressed the button. No sound, no movement, just silence.

"Fuck." I really needed to cut down on my swearing, it was a bad influence on Serenity.

It did not take me long to find the stairwell and open it. Looking up the shaft as the stairs spiralled around was a dizzying experience, which would only be worse if I had to walk down. I licked my lips and looked behind me before digging through my saddle bags. There, near the bottom where I hid them, was my Med-X stash.

It just took one shot into a vein and I felt the pressure of the world lift from my shoulders. The climb up twenty or more stories no longer seemed an imposing task, but little more than a walk around the park. With renewed gusto, and a slightly clouded mind I started to trot up the stairs, humming softly to myself.

It was a hard feeling to describe. I felt lite like air, like nothing could touch me or hurt me. My physical ails were soothed (and I had stacked up many of those, not even including having a building fall on me) and I felt like I could fight a hellhound. Sure it made my head feel fuzzy, but it wasn't as if I was sacrificing a brilliant mind for the effects, so it was worth it. It made things easier.

And things drastically needed to be easier.

The world was falling apart.

No, scratch that. A world that had already fallen apart, but had been stitched together with spare masking tape and was starting to break apart again. Somepony had to do something about the dangers, right? Somepony had to fight back.

And I was somepony. Which is a dramatic thing to say and to think, but it didn't change the fundamental problem of me not knowing how. So here's an impossible test, a set of stairs a thousand miles high that I needed to climb while weighed down by those I was so determined to protect. It was daunting, so who cared if I needed something to help? Something to keep me going.

My mind getting sidetracked made the walk that much quicker so there I was at my destination, where I needed to be. The floor where Mr. House's office was. If he was still alive, that's where he would be. It's where he always was.

I opened the door and left the stairwell.

The smell hit me right away, something I could not ignore. Corpses. It did not take long to find them, three bodies dead against the wall right outside House's office. Two of them I vaguely recalled seeing around on guard duty.

The third I remembered vividly. A red unicorn stallion with a royal blue mane and two large cybernetic wings. I leaned down to be closer to his corpse, he deserved that much. The history of his death was written on his body. I traced my hoof across the armour he wore, stopping at the holes that stained blood on his lower chest. Shot from below and from the front, multiple times. He was loyal to the end.

I looked back to his face where his eyes were still wide open in shock and I reached over and gently closed them. He told me before that his cybernetics caused him constant pain. So at the very least, he would be in pain no longer.

Still. There was work to be done. I stood up and opened the door to Houses office, praying.

There he was standing at his computer that somehow still had power. Mr. House did not turn his head at all, but he did speak. "I have been waiting for you," he said simply. "You betrayed me."

I took a step into the office and took a look around. He still hadn't gotten the windows replaced from the explosion, and besides the working computer the rest of the office looked... broken. Not just from the explosion, but it looked ransacked, and I clearly saw a stain on the carpet that looked like someone had tried to clean up blood.

"I sent so many ponies on your stupid mission." He didn't move except to press a few buttons on the terminal he was looking at. At least his voice didn't change, but it was odd hearing a normal voice coming from the stallion. "To the mountains. There was not enough left to protect me. I barely survived." He did not move, he did not pace, he did not gesture.

"You didn't."

He stood completely still, as if he were made from stone, and let the words hang in the air for a solid minute before responding. "Explain."

"You're not Mr. House." I took a step forward towards whoever was there. "Who are you?" I had my suspicions, and they turned out to be correct.

The pony that looked like Mr. House turned to me and his body faded revealing a golden stallion with shiny black cybernetic limbs. "You knew... it was not a very good disguise." He stared at me with unblinking red eyes. "Mr. House did survive though. I saw him. The mob lynched him, but ghouls are hard to kill. I... wanted to save him. But I was given directives. Continue his work." He looked... sad? Maybe. It was hard to tell.

"Wishing Star..." It was his name. The absurdly powerful cyborg Hizai agent Mr. House loved. He had the power to make him look like someone else using something similar to changeling magic, not that I knew what that meant but that's what he said. "Are you okay?"

He lowered his head and didn't speak.

"Wishing." I moved closer, but slowly, careful not to startle him.

"He is currently being held in the Enclave Raptor." he turned back to the computer, his form turning back into that of Mr. House's. "I am not allowed to rescue him. You can. It would be penance for your betrayal and... I would be thankful."

I gulped and nodded. "Are you the only one left here?"

He didn't look back at me, he just kept staring at the terminal, not touching anything. "Yes," he said coldly, not even bothering to disguise his voice again. "I have no medical skills." He tapped a button and the screens on the large computer turned into a series of security camera feeds. One was pointed at the ticket booth where Serenity and a now awake Platinum Haze were whispering over Flare. "The second floor has medical supplies. Tools. Cybernetic gear. No wings though. Enough there though to help. You may stay in my hotel." He let out a sigh. "There is so much to do..." His voice faded and the computers turned back to what they were.

Slowly, I backed out of the room and closed it behind me. So the BS was currently being run by an imposter, while the real House was locked up in the raptor that hovered over the city. At least he wasn't too bitter, if he even had those emotions left. Still, I needed to get wings from somewhere, I couldn't leave Flare groundbound.

Then I saw him, still lying where he was before, but with his eyes closed. Starscream's final flight, and now all he was was a corpse and spare parts... it made my stomach twist and turn, but as I eyed the cybernetic wings on his back I knew it was too good to give up.

I grabbed the wing in my teeth, pushed down on the corpse and pulled. It was an awkward position, and maybe that's why no matter how hard I pulled the wings were not coming loose. I let the wing drop from my mouth and thump back down to the ground. Flare needed the wing, he needed to...

I looked down at my metal hoof and just stared. It really was a sophisticated design, the way the gears and electronics blended together, yet still somehow made something that could last what I've been through. I raised the hoof above the ground, and with a soft metallic scraping sound let the hidden blade inside show itself. I looked at the blade, then back to what remains of Starscream.

Maybe it was the Med-X thinking, but something had to be done.

I headed back towards where the others were waiting for me. I didn't find help, but I found the next best thing. The walk down the impossibly long stairwell was faster than the walk up, so I had that comfort at least, but it was a bit more dangerous as I did it mostly with my eyes closed. The gap in the middle of the stairwell (that was just big enough to fit, say, me) was not something I wanted watch as I descended.

I made it down in one piece, thank Celestia, and back to the ticket booth.

"Hired!" Platinum Haze rose when I walked in, and I couldn't help but notice her legs were shaky. "You're okay! We... We were so worried." She did not move to greet me, as the ticket booth was narrow, and Flare took up a good chunk of it lying down. "We tried to stop the building but..." Her head lowered in shame that I couldn't comprehend, and I could see her horn spark a faint purple.

"You saved all our lives." I said as gently as I could, but my voice sounded rougher than I meant it. It had been a long day, and it was going to get longer still. "Today, and before. Don't worry."

"But we—" she started until Serenity interrupted her.

"You heard the lady! No tear-faces, an' we got work to do, c'mon." She stood up as well looking to me, "Is there anyone here, Momma?"

"Just one person. He's... he can't help." She started to deflate but I quickly added, "But there's medical stations on the second floor, and, I found these." I pulled out the cybernetic wings I borrowed from Starscream, "And these."

Serenity's eyes went wide and she lept over Flare to look at the wings up close, "Those are so cool! Where did you get them!"

"Yes," Platinum Haze said, looking down at my slightly pink tinted hooves. "Where?"

"It's a hotel of cyborgs that got sacked, I found them." Which was not exactly a lie, though it was certainly as close as one could get without their pants catching fire. "Flare could use them. He could... he loves flying, so I thought..."

"We should ask him what he thinks of it," Platinum Haze said. "He may not wish to augment his body." That struck me as odd, and then it instantly made sense. I was so used to have bits and bobs of metal jammed into me whenever something went wrong, it had never even occurred to me that someone might not want it. It was a painful procedure after all, and there was the stigma attached. Would the rest of his Enclave family even consider it the same, would they shun him? I didn't know the answer, but it was still a

personal matter. It just... was odd to me, but I had gone so far down the path of cybernetics I could have my whole body replaced without missing much... but that'd look dumb.

"But they look so cool!" Serenity said, pointing excitedly at the wings, "If he doesn't want them can I have them?"

"No." I tried to use my 'don't argue with me' voice, but it didn't work.

"But why~?" she asked, deliberately trying to be as whiny as possible.

"You're too young." She started to talk over me but I lifted a hoof to silence her. "You're still growing. You'd have to replace them constantly, and it would be painful. When you're older, and stopped growing, we'll talk."

"Oh..." She thought about that and nodded, "That's a good point. Alright, we'll talk then! But um," she looked down at Flare, "What should we do?"

"Get him to the medical ward. Heal him as best you can, then... when he wakes up, we talk. Can you do that?" The healing up part I meant.

"I think so..." She didn't sound so sure, "I know a bit, and... I'll do my best!"

"After that, you may need to look at Haze's wing." Looking over at Haze it was plain to see that even with her wings folded up, one of them was crooked in a way that made me wince.

"We... are unsure that is possible." Haze said as I started to help Flare onto my back. Once I got him secure up there I looked back up at Haze to let her finish explaining. "Radiation heals us," I don't think I liked where this was going, "Our wing bones were broken and crooked and... healed like this." She lifted up her wing revealing the odd crook.

"Oh..." I wasn't sure what that meant, but I could take a guess and say that it was not a good thing.

"Owie," Serenity said wincing. "I could, um... maybe if you break it and..." Maybe it was a bit too advanced for her.

"We will be fine. We were poor at flying regardless, so it is not a terrible loss for the nonce," she said calmly. "We should worry about Flare: he is in dire straits." Right, we couldn't stand around talking anymore. I turned and left the ticket booth and headed towards the medical bay.

The medical wing had most of its consumables ransacked, but there still remained a few well-hidden healing potions, antibiotics, and other things I didn't know the names of. The larger machines were there as well, but I wasn't sure what they did though Serenity seemed excited about some of them. I didn't stay to watch as Serenity did her best to heal Flare (though I did set up a few boxes so she could reach him on his bed), as I didn't want to distract her. Platinum Haze followed me out into the hallway, which was a plus as I had wanted to speak to her.

"How are you holding up?" I asked in the sterile white hallway. I wasn't a fan of pure white buildings, so at least history had decayed it enough that it wasn't too disturbing.

"Considering we had a building fall upon our head, we cannot complain overmuch about our state. We would be lying if we said we were not sore though, and our wing troubles us when we move it." I nodded grimly, taking another look at the mangled wing.

"I know the feeling." Though med-x helped dull the pain, it could only do so much. "Your horn is on the fritz right?"

"Yes, our magic has been expended. The ambient radiation outside is helping, however it may be a day or so before we can cast another spell. Is there something you required of it?"

I licked my lips and nodded, "If you wanted, that is." I sighed, "Do you remember that orb in the tunnel?" She visibly shuddered but gave a consenting nod. "Is there a way you could... nullify it's power? Like..."

She nodded slowly, and I could tell she was deep in thought. "In it's essence, it is illusion magic, though incredibly powerful. We could enchant a device to wrap around it that could suppress it's magic field, but nothing we could do would be able to remove its power entirely."

That was... good. "When you're ready, that'd be helpful." I had plans for the orb, though I had no idea if they'd work at all. Plans really shouldn't be made that relied on a crazy ancient megaspell pony with a goddess complex being reasonable.

"We shall start right away." She started to turn but I held up a hoof.

"Haze." She stopped in her tracks and turned back towards me. "You need to rest."

"Oh." She seemed to have forgotten the fact that her horn wasn't working.

"Haze." I reached up to touch her cheek, "You don't have to listen to me."

"We often don't," she said, which was fair enough. Still, I had this worry, and it had been nagging at me for a while. She had been so used to being bossed around by a powerful figure, a goddess apparently, and I didn't want her to think of me in that role. It didn't help that she kept pushing me into taking some semblance of control over the city.

"Just..." Why were things so hard to explain.

"You are worried that we care for you only because thou art an imposing figure who reminds us of our mother?" I looked back up at her to try and decipher what she thought about that, but her face was fairly neutral. "We understand, but it is not so. We care for you because you're earnest and straightforward in a world of twists and turns. You are a rock we can rest our burdens upon and we know that when the storms come we shall not wash away." She smiled. "We understand that simplifies things to a certain degree, but we feel it is the truth enough and should lessen your worries."

I gave her a small earnest smile, "Thank you." With that she leaned down to nuzzle my cheek affectionately.

"Thank you. We pray that when this is all over that you will still be well, and that perhaps we can spend some more private time together. As it stands now we have so little time to rest."

"Yeah," I said softly. "Maybe take a vacation."

"We would like that." She started to turn away, "For now we will think upon the spell you asked us to perform, but we shall not attempt it until we are certain we can do so within the realm of safety."

Things became quiet for a while after that as she thought about the spell and I worried over life. To be truthful, I wasn't entirely sure what I was doing, or what my plans were. I knew I had to destroy the megaspell chamber, and use the fractured alliance I was building to confront The Watchers, but when and how to do that escaped me. The larger assumption that my alliance, or whatever I was going to call it, would stick together long enough to bring an end to the chaos was on shaky ground, and that was ignoring the fact that The Watchers were well-versed in sowing chaos,

Ugh.

I rubbed my temple and took a deep breath. I needed to focus, and tackle things one at time. The most important thing was to get rid of the megaspell chamber. So I had to do that. Molly had given me the location of it, so I just had to get in there. It was pointless to try by myself, and my companions were too occupied. I suppose I could have waited, but it was so close... the fire that burned inside me needn't burn inside anyone else. I wouldn't risk anyone else becoming a weapon against their will.

So I had to go... and at that moment I realized how I could.

"Momma!" My head jolted up shaking the thoughts out of my head and I looked towards Serenity who was peeking out of the door. "Flare's awake, he wants'a talk with'ya"

Right. More talking. I stood up and entered the room past my daughter to see Flare awake on the hospital bed. His coat looked pale, and there were bags under his eyes, which were even more bloodshot than usual.

"So." He said as I walked over slowly, his voice sounding hoarse and haggard. "The moon fell on us?" I nodded my agreement. "It'll make a good story," he said bleakly. "Serenity told me about... my..." His voice choked up and he took a deep breath. "It's the greatest fear of any pegasus you know... our lives, our identity, everything we are, everything that makes us special, it's all tied up in our wings. It's our identity. It's what let the Enclave live safely among the clouds. It's what allowed the Enclave Remnants to break away from the depravity of the enclave and find a new way. It's on cutie-marks, and flags, and..." He closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"I know." He lifted a leg shakily to wipe at his tearing eyes. "What am I supposed to do?"

"I... I found a cyber wing... you could—"

"What?" he interrupted sharply. "Become a freak, a fake, a pose—" He stopped and stared at me, "Listen, no offence..."

"None taken." He was obviously in a bad way, so being offended would have just been stupid. I needed to let him vent.

"I just..." He sat up a little until Serenity hopped up to gently push him back down. "To the Remnants, I was always half a dirt pony. I spent a lot of time with them, had various boyfriends, you know, not a single one was a pegasus." I actually didn't know that. "Then the incident at the mountain, I eventually quit the Remnants, you found me on the streets, sleeping in dirt." He smiled. "Where I belonged. You said it yourself then, they were going to kill me."

I nodded slowly. It was an odd thing to think of, that I was originally suppose to kill Flare. "But they took you back."

"Hah." He smiled. "That's a better joke than anything I ever told. Sure, they took me back and gave me a special rank and patted me on the back. But only because they could get something. I was complicit in what happened to you, I realize it now."

"What?" He was rambling a lot, it didn't make a lot of sense.

"The Enclave and Watchers. They're... you know, partners. I was brought back to watch you... heh, watch. And... what do you think I was watching for?" Oh. "I didn't realize it at the time... but there you go.

Now with the civil war going on they don't want me with them planning an attack, they sent me to the bloody revolution, the teeming mass of dirt pony dissenters, and do you know why?"

"Because you're closer to them?"

"I have a fucking house underground! Did you see it... what kind of joke is that?" A bad one. "So maybe we should cut the other wing off..."

"But you... Flare. You love flying."

"Yeah..." His voice lowered and he looked off in the distance. "But what's the point? They won't take me back. I've outlived my usefulness..."

"So then get cybernetics!" He looked back up at me. "I mean. They won't take you back. Or... accept you. Either way, right? So... get the wing. Fly, and be free of them, fly for yourself."

"He might never forgive me if I do that..." Oh for fuck's sake, not the pronoun game.

"Who?"

He seemed surprised when I asked, almost as if he had thought he was just thinking it not speaking out loud. "High Stakes." I started to talk, but he cut me off. "You never knew him!" he said defensively. Though I did know he was a good shot with a shotgun. I scratched at my scarred face irritably but I let him continue. "He was kind, comforting. He listened to me, and cared what I had to say I..." He shook his head slowly, "He thought he was doing the right thing shooting you... maybe he did. Maybe I should have gone with him..."

I let out a sigh, "Maybe you should have."

"I think about him a lot. It's stupid, I know. He betrayed us, betrayed you. But he..." Flare closed his eyes. "I...I need to think about it."

"But-" He cut me off before I could continue.

"Just let me think. A day. Or two. I need to walk my own path, decide from there."

I still had walking to do. Work to be done, places to go, ponies to... see. I had thought about waiting for my friends to get back to full health, but the longer we were in the city, the more dangerous it became. The Watchers were often true to their name, and our presence in the city would not go unnoticed for long, and that made it dangerous. So I had to be quick, get what I needed.

Then figure out the next step. It wasn't as simple as one hoof in front of the other, it was a complicated step, like a dance to a song I'd never heard of before. Maybe I wasn't the right pony for the job, but somepony had to, and nopony else was around to try. It would probably easier if I had some sort of plan.

Well, I had a plan, It just wasn't a very good one. The first step was talking to Walkkirk, and to do that I had to go outside and face the radiation. My pipbuck started to tick as I stepped out the doors of the BS into the smoking city. It smelt of dust and ruin, and the surface was abandoned again. My eyes glanced over to the missing spot in the skyline where the Moon once stood, then down to the rubble that blanked the street all around giving testament to what it once was.

It was hard to tear my eyes off the empty space. It just felt so wrong for there to be nothing there, and it was hard to adjust to the new reality of the city. My eyes fell to my destination, barely a walk across the street. Clips and Clops home of the Enigmatic Walkkirk was heavily guarded. An army of Ponitrons stood at the ready, and none looked friendly. Among the robotic guards were various ponies walking back and

forth looking annoyed and worried in turn. It was odd to see Galician Guards, as most of Walkirk's gang spent their time inside and let the robots do the grunt work. Either way it was problematic, as it meant gaining access to my destination that way was impossible.

Luckily I knew another way to Walkirk. I headed off to the slums of the city, and as I drew near to the teeming mass of newly built structures half built on-top of one another I realized it still had ponies occupying it despite the new blanket of radiation that covered the land.

The Slums were a hard place to describe. The city was essentially split into four quadrants with a giant fountain in the middle and two roads intersecting in the middle. Going north brought you to the ruins of The Moon on the left side, and the Alehouse on the right, while going south took you to The BS and Clips and Clops on alternate sides of the streets (Eventually leading to the Enclave Apartment building, and Watcher HQ). If you go west from the intersection you couldn't go far before reaching a wall that cut off the city dramatically and if you went past the wall you'd reach the giant crater from an impact (a meteor, or so it was said) from during the war.

East, and you find the slums, built in what was apparently once a giant plaza, or maybe a park, before the war. It little resembled that now. Wood and stone were piled half-haphazardly on top of each other creating makeshift houses, stores, and the like. The slums were probably small at first, but eventually spiralled out of control until it was a maze of half-ruined and half-built buildings, teeming with people.

Well, usually teeming. The balefire had driven many underground, but not all. As I walked through the nearly empty creaking ruins I heard a voice. It was a gentle coughing coming from a rough wooden shack nestled into the chaos. Stepping over debris, I made my way to the building, pushing through the blanket that the residents had used as a door. The coughing grew louder as I entered.

Inside were two ponies, a young colt old enough to have his cutie-mark but not much older, and a sickly looking older stallion. The stallion's mane had turned grey, but I could tell that wasn't it's original colour, and he looked impossibly skinny, with sunken cheeks and bones stretching his thin skin with a patchy coat that only half covered him.

The smell inside was obnoxious, like vomit and other less savoury things. I wasn't a medical professional but I guessed his father was suffering from advanced radiation poisoning. It was the most obvious answer.

The boy turned to me and yelled, his voice hoarse, "Go away! You already took everything! There's nothing left!" Tears were welling up in his eyes as he screamed. "G-go!"

I thought about asking him for his name, but it wasn't my business. "Here." I still had some rad-away left in my bag I had been planning to keep for myself, but the child needed them more so I tossed them towards the stained mattress the two were sharing.

The colt looked tentatively at the two potions not making any movements before looking up at me with big eyes. "W-why..."

That was an odd question considering. "Go to the Black Salamander. Inside the radiation won't hurt you. I have friends there. They could help. Can you carry him?"

The colt looked unsure but gave a strong courageous nod. "Yes!" He quickly picked up the rad-away and fed it to his father (I guessed) as I closed the curtain and went on my way. I heard him ask what my name was as I left, and I answered.

"Hired Gun."

There were others as I walked through the slums, more and more ponies, most sick or caring for the sick. Slowly from talking to them, and telling them where to find some semblance of help, I learned that the

only entrance to the tunnels in this area had been under guard by Watcher forces. Despite their stockpile, they said the most desperately ill couldn't go underground and get their help because they were already lost causes and it would take away resources from those who could possibly be helped. Maybe it was true, but I can't say I liked that sort of deadly math.

Regardless, I eventually found my way to the tunnel that had been sectioned off. The building I knew to be the entrance to the underground had a crude wall built around it, and was patrolled by a number of nervous looking guards. Also notable was that I saw no bodies surrounding the encampment, but I did notice a few suspicious stains.

I didn't stop though, just walked calmly towards the gap in the fortifications.

"Stop!" I heard somepony yell, but I kept walking.

"Stop!" a different guard said, but I took another step.

"I'll shoot." Said a third, and then I did stop to look at the ponies. Three stallions and two mares were pointing mean looking weaponry at me. "Step back." The mare who was lugging an LMG on a battle saddle said. When I didn't she said more seriously, "This area is restricted. We have no medicine for you. We're sorry."

I stared at her very seriously before asking, "Do I look like I need medicine."

"You have blood on you," one stallion said.

"You're limping," one of the mares pointed out, which was true enough.

"Your pupils are oddly dilated, are you high?" a second stallion added.

I continued to stare until they answered my question. They looked away from me briefly to whisper furiously amongst themselves before turning back to me. The mare with the LMG said, "You can come in, but don't expect any medicine."

These tunnels I had taken before, so my hooves moved step after step without even having to think of them. All four of us had travelled these tunnels before to get to Walkirk, so I was careful to avoid a particular side tunnel. Not that it helped the whispering wind in my head as I moved close to it, but I avoided the more obvious mental alterations for which which I was thankful.

I knew I needed to come back down to these tunnels again sooner rather than later, but that was a bridge I'd go across when I came to it. For the time being I had other pressing matters (and indeed the number of pressing matters I had grown by the hour) so I kept walking even though my body still ached.

Instead I thought about more distressing things. Like if Flare was going to be okay, if Platinum Haze would regain her magic, and if she too would ever fly again, if Serenity would have a place to stay and be safe when this was all over. That was the goal, in the end, create safety. The Watchers said that was their plan too, and I had no doubts that they truly believed that, but their attempts were tearing the city apart.

So I had to stop them. Somehow.

Then I had to tie the fractured remains of a broken city back together.

I had to stop all the death and destruction that had gripped Dise.

It was a daunting task, probably impossible, and just thinking of it made the tunnels seem so much heavier above me. The ceiling felt like it was sagging, weighed down by the city on top of it. Thousands of tons of buildings, and people, and with each new tragedy the weight just kept growing, threatening to collapse the tunnels and crush me.

I stopped to close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to let the stress wash off me like rain.

I took another step, and kept walking. One step at a time. Canterlot wasn't built in a day... though it was hard to forget that it was destroyed in one.

Eventually I found my way to the secret elevator, and stepped inside. It was the same as before, and when I reached the top the speaker that greeted me as "Mr. Walkkirk." told me the last time I visited was just weeks ago instead of over two hundred years. Outside, the remains of the Ponitrons Haze zapped were still there, lying still as the grave, so nothing stopped me from entering the computer room.

Walls of electronics greeted me, much as I had remembered before. I didn't bother looking at them, they meant nothing to me, I just looked at the largest screen where an image of a slightly overweight brown stallion was waiting for me looking annoyed and impatient.

"You've returned," he said impassively.

"I have." I licked my lips, looking around the room curiously. "Lovely city you have here, I love what you've done with it in my absence."

The picture on the screen narrowed its eyes at me. "You dare—"

"I'm just curious. You told the NCA where to find me. Why?"

The pony on the screen still seemed unamused, but answered, "I came to the conclusion that their military might would be useful against the actions against my great city. I cannot let it die."

"And yet," I said slowly, staring the pony on the screen dead in the eyes, "it is dying. Dise is dead. Isn't it?"

The pony grit his teeth and reluctantly nodded. "For now... I have been forced to give in to some... demands by the Watchers on behalf of the revolutionaries." That was a shock, and I recoiled back slightly looking behind me. "Don't worry, I didn't give you away. Just let them use my facilities for the time being.... I am making plans to remove them and restore the status quo, don't worry. I would have invited you, but you destroyed my vessel."

"You stopped occupying your 'vessel'. Then it attacked us." I pointed out.

"Don't get me wrong, Hired, we are still on the same side." I wasn't sure we ever were. "I did what needed to be done at the time, and I am still doing that. Trust me. I've kept the city in line for so long, and I will wrestle it back, but you must be patient and follow my commands." That was a joke, right?

I wouldn't have followed Walkkirk's plans even if it were him who I was talking to. But I wasn't talking to Walkkirk, not really. It was a copy of his memories on an incomplete computer. A series of ones and zeros going through the motions, pantomiming life, but it wasn't really. The way he talked, his vocabulary, his inflection, everything about him, it was as if an alien was mimicking pony behaviour but couldn't get it right, or someone was above him pulling strings like a puppet. He made all the right movements, but something was off. The more I talked to him the more I realized it.

He was dangerous. Stuck in the past, in his old ideas and plans to keep Dise safe, he couldn't see that his way was broken, that by keeping the city fractured he contributed to the problems we were all paying for. There was no alternate method for him, maybe his program wouldn't allow it, but he couldn't see past.

I licked my lips and stared him dead in the eyes. How easy it would have been for me to destroy his computer right then. To smash it into pieces, to scatter the wires and circuits and hard drives so his body could not be repaired. But I needed him. For the moment. I don't even think he realized the threat I posed.

"Hired?" the machine said.

"Of course. But I have a plan." The pony on the screen looked to be frowning before the screen turned into a picture of a clock ticking down.

"You have one minute."

Really? How dramatic. "Give me control of your Ponitrons." Barely took three seconds, that.

The clock paused and I heard an electronic chuckling coming from the computer's speakers. "You're kidding."

"No." I licked my lips in anticipation. This had to work, I needed them, I had a project I needed to complete. The sooner the better. "But I know where the megaspell chamber is. Under the city. I need them to destroy it."

"How do you kno—"

I cut him off. "You have one minute to decide." Okay, I wasn't actually going to count out a minute, but I felt teasing him by turning his words back on him would help my case.

"You can borrow them..." He reluctantly said fifty nine seconds later. "On your pipbuck. Bring it here." The screen pointed to a port on the vast computer system that I could connect my pipbuck to. It took me a few tries to figure out, but eventually it worked. "The commands can be complicated..." he said as a program was downloaded onto my pipbuck, "But I installed some foolproof operating systems." He clearly underestimated my ability to be a fool. "It should allow you some basic control over nearby ponitrons... I hope you know what you're doing."

The computer beeped and I pulled my pipbuck away and turned towards the door in one smooth motion. "I don't." I said, and walked out the door.

One step at a time.

I was getting closer. I could feel excitement rising in my gut, but I knew there was more to be done, and I had to keep moving before everything caught up with me. I had the map on my pipbuck, the one that led me to the megaspell chamber. First I needed my army, and I knew just where to get it. Instead of taking the elevator down back into the tunnels I took it up into the Clips and Clops.

I'd been in the casino a few times before and, other than it being deserted, it remained remarkably the same. So I glanced at the doors as in passing and read the names of the drugs on the signs as I walked through the still halls. It was a place where you came to have fun, after all, no matter how you did that.

The main floor of the casino was a vast pink party. Streamers hung from the rafters, though most had been torn. Balloons were tied to each and every slot machine, but the helium in them had started to leak and they drooped lazily to the floor as if holding themselves up was too tough. Garbage was strewn across the floor haphazardly, covering up the bright and erratically coloured carpet, and My pipbuck ticked gently. Whoever inhabited the building were on high floors, in radiation proof rooms no doubt. The Baises, and some of the Watchers too, sitting up there waiting.

It amused me to walk underneath the Watchers hooves. They didn't realize I was crawling below them, wading through the empty party, undetected, yet heading off to destroy them. I wondered if Clean Cutt was up in some secret room plotting, or if Tight Lips, that traitor, was pacing back and forth nervously as

the news that I was alive reached her ears. They knew I was coming for them, they must, but they didn't know how or where. And by the time they did, it'd be too late.

So long as I kept walking.

I exited the main entrance of the casino.

All at once the ponies and ponitrons guarding the door in a line turned to me, weapons pointed. I lifted up my pipbuck to press a button then kept walking. Simultaneously the Ponitrons lowered their weapons and started to line up behind me. "Stop!" one of the guards said, her face twisted into a mask of confusion.

"No."

"I said stop!" the mare yelled again, and the pain in my shoulder told me she was lifting something in her magic, probably a gun, but I didn't turn around to check. It didn't really matter, she wasn't going to shoot.

And she didn't, I kept walking, and the robots rolled behind me.

What can I say, I had a penchant for the dramatic. It was also the easier route to where I was going, so I hung a right on the main road and marched my way down to the main Watcher Compound.

I wasn't the best at following maps, I must admit, but I eventually found my way there, though the Watchers didn't make it easy. I had to find my way through an abandoned building to get to a secret entrance to the tunnels, and follow through a maze of corridors, traps (literal traps, mines and what have you) and hidden entrances to get to my destination. It was hard to imagine how Molly got all the way through undetected, because I knew I hadn't. I used brute force to get through doors, and had my little minions blow up obstacles in my path. It didn't matter to me, I knew where I needed to go, and it was just one step away.

Eventually the maze led me to my destination. I knew when I got closer because the shabby walls of the tunnels turned into newly painted corridors, refurbished and made to look brand new. There were no stains on the wall, no graffiti, no signs of death or destruction. Somehow the dank dark tunnels that terrors called home looked brand new. It made me sick.

I turned a corner. Behind me the dozen or so ponitrons I had... borrowed... rumbled loudly. It was not a tactical strike by any means. At the far end of the hallway I entered was a large metal door guarded by two mares with guns, rather large guns to be honest.

"Halt!" one of them screamed, but I kept walking. A lot of ponies had told me to stop today, and yet...

"Not another step," the second mare said glaring, and for the first time I stopped. They looked scared. They must have known I was coming. Scanning the white painted hallway I noticed a speaker in the far corner that looked freshly installed, at least by wasteland standards. Perhaps they were told I was coming. The Watchers probably had cameras, and the explosions weren't subtle. I wondered what their orders were. Maybe to kill me? Or just hold me off until they could get backup. That seemed very unfair to them.

So I let them off easy.

I bit down on the bit of my battle saddle and let a gout of flame burst forth from my flamethrower into the air. It wasn't close enough to hit them, but the sudden heat and fire made them flinch back.

I ran.

The remnants of the fire and smoke swirled around me singeing my coat and mane. Jumping forward the sword in my leg shot forward. At the end of my jump my sword was jabbed painfully in the rightmost mare's foreleg.

She screamed, but I ignored it. My head turned to the other mare but I kept my blade in the first, even though she writhed in pain. "I ignored major arteries. I think." The second mare gulped, but kept her gun trained on me. "Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe when I pull this blade out, she will bleed out. I wonder how long it will take." I looked back towards my ponitron followers. "This is a Watcher base. There has to be medical supplies nearby. Maybe you'll have time to save her."

I pulled the blade free and stepped back.

The second mare rushed to her fallen friend, hoisted her up, and ran off down the hall, my ponitrons parting to let the panicked mare past.

My heart was racing as I turned to face the great metal door. I pressed my hoof against the door, and let out a deep sigh. I was so close. Beyond the door was the start of all this chaos, and I was about to remove it from the equation. I reached for the handle but a crackling sound stopped me.

It was the sound of a speaker turning on.

"*Hired Gun*," a smooth authoritative voice spoke to me, and I felt a chill go down my spine.

"Clean Cutt." I recognized the voice, I had talked to him before, enough to force myself to remember. "You didn't guard this place very well."

"*I sent most of them away*," he said simply. "*I don't know how you hacked those ponitrons, but I get the feeling your daughter helped with that. I remember when we found her, so small, so timid, but she took to technology like a pegasus takes to flight. It's how we used to calm her down when she got upset, show her some fancy technology, and even at her tender age she would focus in on it. Truly it was her destiny.*"

"What is your point?" I tried to keep my tone level. I was sure there was some game he was playing, some trick. This was the person that orchestrated all this chaos, I couldn't trust him.

"*Just something I thought you'd like to know. You did a good job fostering her natural ability.*" When I didn't immediately respond I heard a static-y chuckle flow out of the speaker. "*You are so suspicious. I am not your enemy.*"

"That has to be a joke." I just shook my head. "You tried to kill me. Kidnapped my daughter. And so much more."

"*Heh.*" Well that was comforting, "*I suppose you have a point. But what I mean is we needn't be enemies. I just wanted to talk to you. I know you want to be a hero, but sometimes that's not possible.*"

"Excuse me if I don't care to listen." I started towards the door again. "I've heard enough of your stories from Dragonslayer."

"*I am not Dragonslayer.*"

"One time I took a caravan through the canyon to Karkhoof. Dragonslayer was there. Did you know?" When he didn't say anything I continued my story taking another step towards the door. "As we travelled, giant canyon monsters attacked. Called land sharks. Or quarry eels. Doesn't matter. They attacked, and I fought back. Does it matter at that point which one attacked first? All were a threat."

"*That's a fair point, but if you will allow me. I have a metaphorical tale as well.*" He coughed into his microphone and continued. "*At my old practice in Eye Glow I had a patient, a young filly no older than*

your daughter.” I could already tell he was going to try and tug at my heart strings. “Her mother brought her in with a wound to her knee. A small gash, but it wasn’t healing, it smelled and reddened and spat out pus. A terrible infection, I knew it right away, and I told the filly’s mother the truth. To save the girl, I had to remove the leg. The mother wouldn’t have it, she refused to see the danger her daughter was in. She thought a healing potion and prayers would fix her, so do you know what I did?” He didn’t give me a chance to answer, as he kept talking. “I removed the leg without her permission. It was a painful surgery, and it was immoral to do it without her mother’s consent. But you must see, that if I did not do it the child would die. Years later when I was taking my organization out of Eye Glow, and to the newly found city of Dise that child came to me, and begged me to let her join. She saw what I did for her was worth it”

His was certainly more long winded if nothing more. “So that’s your justification for everything you did?”

“No, it’s merely an illustration.” The voice on the speaker sighed. “I am old and like to tell stories. They help one thing, let them see with clear eyes the truths that are often obfuscated. Still, I can see I will not convince and in truth I never intended to. You are stubborn, I know. When I bought you I learned a lot about you.”

I glared up at the speaker before taking another step towards the door only to see it open all of a sudden.

“Smooth Tongue told me your history, about your wife, and your daughter.”

Inside there was a large darkened five sided chamber. The walls of the chamber did not go straight up, instead they bent at odd awkward angles, each differently, and each kept bending and twisting until they somehow reached the middle of the ceiling at a sharp point. The walls were covered in strange runes, eldritch designs I couldn’t place that glowed a faint and deadly green in the dark light. I walked forward to find a series of stairs leading to the centre of the chamber. These stairs too were not designed in normal right angles, but at odd points, with gaps, and drops that made walking down them difficult and confusing.

“Do you know what it takes to make balefire?”

In the centre of the room there was a table covered in blood, with three lanterns around it standing on what looked like black shelves. The lanterns were all glowing, but seemed to produce little light, and when I got closer I realized that those flames were dragon fire. I don’t know how I knew, I couldn’t explain it, but it was like the burning in my shoulder, I just knew.

“Ghouls aren’t created from nothing. Dragon flames are laced in necromancy. The black arts were difficult to learn, but to save the city and the wastes I would sell my soul and help others do the same.”

It was a terrible place, just being in the chamber sent shivers down my spine, and I could feel sweat bead down my forehead. This was an evil place, a dark place, and yet somehow I felt like I belonged here. It was here, or a place like it, that I was turned into an abomination against my will. It was here I would end this. Or at least... start the ending.

“We could bring them back.”

The words crept into my ears and sent shivers down my spine. I squeezed my eyes tight, but it didn’t make the feeling of dread go away. Just being in that room made my head pound, and closing my eyes made the pounding harder. Like the darkness of the room was clawing at my skull, digging and trying to get inside. The temptation tore at me, and I could feel my resolve weakening. If he could do that...

Survive.

The word whispered in my ears. I had to step forward, not back.

My eyes shot open and I turned around and pressed button on my pipbuck. As I did the ponitrons started to file into the room, weapons raised. Another button press and they started to fire. The walls cracked

them crumbled, the flames were shot through and put out, and slowly the room was breaking and burning, the way it was meant to be.

I let them shoot and walked out the door. I had friends to see, to tell them the good news, to inform them that I had plans. Plans for the city, to fix the city, to take it out. And though the darkness of the room haunted me, and reminded me of what had happened, I knew I had to keep walking forward. Dis may be dead, but it could be renewed. If I did things right. No half measures.

I took another step.

Level Up!

Skill Note: No Skill Milestones!

((A/N: This chapter was a pain, time was not on my side. Though I would like to thanks Kkat for creating the world, as well as my editors for their dutiful work: TheBSDude, Julep, and Menti. As well as Equestri_Narrator who does the audiobook which will be coming within a week.

To keep you all informed these past few months I have been working every weekend all weekend at a military base, as well as going to University five days a week. So writing has been difficult. It will be even more difficult this summer as I will be on an army course full time. I might have weekends off, but I doubt it, so here's the plan going forward. I will be finishing a chapter before I leave (June 8th) and give it to my editors, and I will attempt to go through the edits and post it while on course when I have time. If not it the chapter after this will be posted near the end of August, it's the best I can do.

If you really need to read something, [Fallout Equestria Ashes](#) has just updated with a huge 30k chapter! Read it))

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