

"What's Left To Lose"

What happens to heartache when there are no more tears to shed?

There once was a time I used to dream.

Those days, I hoped, were long behind me, but there is no such mercy in the wasteland. It likes to take your greatest desire and your deepest regret and taunt you with them, reminding you that once upon a time you loved, you laughed, and now you cry. You could never turn back time, but the memory remained to be revisited. Some fools dreamed of better food, better company, and a place where things didn't suck. The lies we told ourselves in our dreams, whatever you needed to hear to make sure you woke up the next day did little but stall the inevitable decline into a mad routine.

For me, it's always the same, when I dream, it's of her. The first thing I can remember of her is her scent, a strong, electric smell that recalled the aroma of freshly fallen rain. The second detail, and most striking, was her coat, stark white and tinged grey like aged snow. The way her mane and tail grew from her was like spring come early, with each strand sprouting from her tinged powder coat in an array of loosely organized chaos. I commit to memory every detail, and of all she had been, there was nothing I did not love. From her strong laugh, which she tried to restrain, to the feeling of her wings loosely wrapped around me. Her lips were a form of gentle suffocation, robbing my breath and resolve in equal measure. Star Racer's tall, lean body dwarfed mine, and even in my dreams, she made me feel small by comparison. My slender frame had been a target of ridicule, and many brazen fools undid themselves with their mockery. Yet, when she teased me, my cheeks turned a cherry ripe red for an entirely different reason other than anger.

Every day, it got easier to give in, to sleep a little while longer, to eat a little less, to be a little more reckless. Bit by bit, day by day, the year of her absence eroded my will to carry on. Fear and duty kept me from punching the clock, but tonight had proven I was more than capable of finishing the score.

The world beyond my eyelids, the waking, mournful existence of pain that continued while I dreamt was not the world I wanted. When I opened my eyes, I wouldn't see a hotel suite with all the amenities, on a bed warmed by my Valkyrie. I wouldn't wake to the pitter patter of little hooves, foals eager to start the new day, to learn and play without worry as they became accustomed to their permanent vacation in New Pegasus afforded by the great wealth of the world's best mom.

As I thought of my dream, my mind made it so. Being a lucid dreamer in the wasteland is a curse, and now that I envisioned what may never be, I wanted to make it so. I had always been hard to wake, so I pretended to be asleep, nestled into my lover. She let me sleep in at times, when I really needed

it, and this was one of those times. I wanted to dwell here for a few minutes, at least, to refresh my memory. Then, because it seems even in my dreams there are creatures out to ruin my life, a knock came at the door.

With a soft groan, the tall pegasus rose from bed, stretching her wings with audible pops before she crossed the suite's living room to reach the door. There was no one at the door, and there was nothing beyond it, just an empty blackness, a future where she could not be.

"Gangrene," Star Racer called, her voice drawing near, "Your friends are here."

What friends? I tangled myself in my covers, cursing what lay beyond the door. Star Racer sighed, taking the comforter between her teeth and stripping my cover, leaving me to tremble at the sudden temperature shift.

I curled, closing my eyes, shutting out the world. And I cried.

"Gangrene," Star Racer scolded, "You shouldn't keep them waiting. They need you."

"Comin' from a figment of my noodle, that's a laugh," I croaked, wiping my eyes with a hoof. "You know what's unfair? Losin' you! Why'd you have tah leave me?"

"The Wasteland demands sacrifices," Star Racer said, hanging her head so that her messy green locks fell over her pleasant, lean face. "This was ours." Stiffening, she squared her shoulders and turned quickly, grabbing her helmet on her way toward the door. With a soft **Pssst** of air, she locked her helm into place, now clad in full Enclave Power Armor. "My friends needed me, my love. Now, yours need you." Then, she was gone, just like before. A revisit to our final moments, muddled by mis-memory, yet accurate enough to renew the ache.

Sighing inwardly, I followed after, wondering how this would end and if really, I had friends worth fighting for.

I stirred slowly, my groggy senses shrugging off sleep, starting with the barest of sensation. Pinpricks of light burned my eyes, and the dull rumble of untranslatable conversation was lost on me. The short span of time I spent stunned concluded when the sharp smell of ammonia filled my nostrils.

Reflexively, I inhaled and coughed.

Bolting upright, I launched Rebel off, scattering the smelling salts he'd used to rouse me. He'd helped the process along with a well-placed slap to my cheek, leaving a warm burn that had yet to numb in the cold. My neck popped loudly, not to mention painfully, as I snapped my head around to get a bearing of where I was, minding my stinging cheek with a frigid hoof. After a few moments, I acclimated to my new situation; I wasn't dead, yet, and I was with the others. Steelgraft was nowhere in sight.

And Rebel had slapped me. There was that. My face hurt, but my body positively ached.

Jagged cliffs of rusted metal, made up of run down vending machines and robots, rose up around us. Dilapidated wooden crates, brittle and rotted, dotted the clearing around us, overflowing with rusted out service parts and recycled metals. Tinny laughter echoed from the bowels of a dozen Robronco robots stationed around the chain link fence marking the perimeter of what I now assumed was the scrap yard of a recycling plant. We had not been the first to pass through here, obviously, as there was a modest collection of remains to keep us company. The victims were raiders, Baker Barbarians. Given the nature of their wounds, and the occasional errant luminescent sparkle pile, I wagered they caught the foul end of magical energy weapons.

Someone, likely a member of our group, had moved the dead away to form a clearing

There was a powerful stench of fire in the air, thick with the smell of seared flesh. Radiant heat settling into my aching bones. Angus was busy tending the small fire, hardly big enough to cause the smell, and barely big enough to cook his titanic kabob over. He turned it lazily, after lightly charring one side, whistling himself a Macish tune. If I was out long enough for him to cook something, then that meant I'd been out for quite some time.

"How long hav--"

"Welcome to the **Future!**" screamed the pink spritebot, snapping me from my thoughts, "I knew you were coming, but I wasn't expecting so many guests! And you brought one of my sisters!" The pink ball of random was enthralled with the area around me, particularly around my saddlebags.

"You've been out for about twenty minutes," Standtall rumbled. "I was afraid you'd be out longer, and we'd have to move on without you." He gave a brief pause as Rebel shot him with a

disapproving look, before adding, “The little one would have none of it.”

I nearly choked on the potion Rebel Riot rushed to my lips. I downed it greedily, grunting my thanks. A small collection of empty bottles gathered around me as I quaffed the remaining potions from Keena’s now exhausted supplies. “Guest? I’m here to protect an investment. A very, very, very...” I took a weary breath, “...poor investment.” I winced, magic forcing metal out of my body being a sensation I never got used to. With tiny ‘thuds’, the pieces of shrapnel dropped to the unfurled, half-rotten cardboard box laid out for me.

“And I ain’t your sis,” I rasped, pushing the spritebot away both physically and emotionally.

“I wasn’t talking to you, silly willy!” PNK-3 giggled, bouncing back into place, undeterred by my murderous glare. The spritely construct ducked and weaved between no less than a dozen tasks, between making small talk with my party to making repairs on the robots guarding the perimeter. The rich, tinny laughter was constant, the echo drove off the sound of the wicked music. Both were maddening in their own right.

My expression fought itself to remain pained as a curious flicker entered my thoughts. I was going to ask who she was talking about, but the pain of a bullet grinding through my sinuses on the way out made me convulse, killing my brief curiosity cold. With gritted teeth, I waved the robot to go away. “Jus’ gimme space, yah cray-bot!” The urge to sneeze grew and grew, then exploded in a spray of red.

TINK!

My sneeze launched the embedded round back into the world, where it collided with Standtall.

“Shorry,” I grumbled nasally. Standtall did not reply, sitting there silently as he looked down at the collection of red specks dotting his armor. He gave a shrug. His armor had seen worse, but even so, he moved a massive hoof up to wipe the snot off his chest plate.

“It was subsonic. No way it would have gotten through.” Standtall joked, at least I think it was a joke. With him, you could never tell, and that was a problem for me. Angus, however, took cue and laughed heartily.

Rebel Riot, after a brief snort of a laugh at Standtall's expense, weighed in with the inevitable queries, being utterly clueless as to how I'd gotten so roughed up. These were swiftly brushed aside with a pat to the head and a deceitful smile on the part of yours truly, acting the part of a mother neglecting truthful tones. "Encountered a raider," so said momma bear, and the cub believed, with a healthy dose of skepticism.

"Fued's almaste dain," Angus thundered, turning over the mystery kabob to evenly sear the meat and vegetables. The stench of sour flesh in the air spoiled my appetite. The meat skewer caught fire and he raised it to his lips, extinguishing it with a great blast of his lungs, then it finally joined others on an improvised hub-cap plate.

"Oooo, you brought snacks? I knew I should have brought punch!" The pink robot squeaked out, bemoaning her lack of party favors. This didn't stop her from letting loose a bouquet of streamers into the air. ***FWEE!***

"We got more important things to do than eat yer smelly food!" I snapped, swatting the offered meat stick out of his hand and to the ground.

"It ainae mingin'! It's haggis! oan a stick!" The minotaur snatched up the soiled kabob and blew it off, taking a rough bite out of it. "Fife second rool!" He was disgusting. The others were offered some of this cuisine, but only Keena partook, dashing out from around Standtall before slinking back behind him, obviously avoiding me.

Baha brayed softly in agreement with his master, infatuated with a stray bit of metal lodged between his teeth. The small, wall-eyed beast of burden had a deep oral fixation, his current affair was a grenade pin (which stuck around long after the grenade), forsaking his usual fare of tin cans and metal scrap. He only dropped the inedible metal for a meat skewer when Angus held one out.

Once this adventure was over, I imagined Angus would consider a job as a slot machine. They'd even paint numbers on his bare chest and he'd make them dance by undulating his pecs. How would his sire feel about him as a jester? Or maybe a bar bull with only one hand? A minotaur with one arm was like a stool with three legs, effective if built right but less satisfying to break over someone's head.

I hadn't even felt Rebel Riot jam the syringe into my leg. Med-X was good stuff. One little prick and I'm thinkin' of the stupidest things. Woozily, I held up a hoof to make a point, but my words came out mangled, decidedly silly, and I had forgotten my point in the first place.

The brief high that came with Med X ended just as quickly as it came, levelling off at a nice, pleasant numbness. I could rest a bit more weight on my crippled leg, and while it was far from healed, I was at least able-bodied in the loosest of terms.

The Spritebot chimed, “Rest up quick, we don’t have much time, though if you wanna talk, oh, I’m sure we could do that!”

“What are you even doing out here?” I grunted, pulling Rebel Riot up against my freshly healed side. The shivering little ball of spite nuzzled ruthlessly into me. His tears stung my chilled pelt, but I said nothing, not wanting to embarrass him in front of the others. I lightly stroked his mane before casting a glare in Keena’s direction. I only got an eye-full of Standtall’s colossal, metal-wrapped ass, he had wisely sat between us, Keena’s rifle laying between his forelegs.

“Waiting for you to come by. Steelgraft went up ahead, but I figured you guys would run into trouble.” The robot said in a smug tone. “I was right.” More than anything, I wanted to wipe that permanent grin off her stupid pink little face.

“Whenever you’re ready to leave, speak to me, and we can get going,” She added cheerfully, returning to her routine repairs. There was fat chance I was going to let her tag along, but I saw little choice other than wandering aimlessly without her. Road Apples, there wasn’t time to pick someone last for Hoofball, we needed everyone on the field. Rolling my eyes, I agreed with a groan of exasperation.

“Just one rule, no talking! Capische?”

I was met with silence.

“I said capische?! ” Oh was I getting mad.

“Oh,” PNK-3 said coyly. Robots could sound coy? Who knew. “How am I supposed to give affirmatives if I can’t talk? Who’s a silly pony? Gangrene’s a silly pony!” I wanted to shoot her--Blow her right out of the damned air and then sell her scrap to buy enough drugs to hopefully bleach the very memory of her existence from my mind. Sadly, that would be counter-intuitive for our goals, and I try not to work against myself no matter how much I despised someone else.

“Fine! Just keep it down!” I shouted, already provoked to the edge of my final nerve. I just wanted someone I could yell at, anyone, really. PNK-3 was the perfect target for my rage. As far as I knew, nopony liked her, and no one would miss her. But we needed her right now, so I directed any further vitriol at--

Standtall had been staring at me this whole time, even before I snot-rocketed him with a .38. His faintly glowing visor hid his eyes, but I could feel his stoic gaze on me. Even after I noticed, Standtall didn't play coy, he just kept staring. The only sound he made was his breathing, a shallow, unnatural rattling, which sent a brief tremor of unease up my spine. He'll do.

I snorted, wrapping my leg around my foal protectively, “Whatcha want, old man?” When he didn't respond, I got nervous, then annoyed. My nostrils flared open wide and I spat at him, striking him on the faceplate with a bloody luger. Still, no response, not for a good while. PNK-3 fluttered about in front of him and he requested a quick touch up on his armor. He stood up, stretching out his limbs and displaying the wear and tear his repair talisman had failed to correct. His scrap hopper had likely gone dry, and rusted scrap wasn't the best material for it.

“You almost died,” The massive stallion said.

“No shit,” I grunted.

“I saved your life.” Standtall stated definitely. “If PNK-3 hadn't scrambled my audio inputs, I still would have been under the influence of the Suicide Symphony.” I stiffened at these words. He was right, but that's not what worried me.

It was the fact he'd recognized the song by name.

“What do yah want, a thankyou?” I breathed out, pressing my lips to Rebel's head, the poor boy was so cold. He shouldn't be outside like this. The wastes aren't a safe place for a defenseless, sweet little boy. Now here I was, teaching him how bad the world was. Maybe he'd never leave the nest after this, at least I hoped, he could get a job repairing stuff and not be some stupid' assed bandit or adventurer that'd wind up dead. There were schools in New Pegas, or I'd find one of those eggheads in a labcoat to teach him an honest trade. Yeah, I was sending mixed signals! I went from distant, dark mentor to doting mother at the drop of “Almost died”. Rebel vacillated between content, confused, and disgruntled.

“I want you to think,” Standtall stated. “I’ve seen many things in Detroit. I still remember what it was like before the **Deadzone** dropped.” Just how old *was* this geezer? “I’m not a fool, I’ve been around the bend enough times to recognize the signs, to know when something is amiss or to tell when somepony isn’t being honest.” My guts knotted with worry, my gaze locked only on him as everything, including the laughter, became the backdrop to my queasy nerves.

What if he knew? Oh buck, what if he knew? He could have figured out I pretended to be a Star Paladin to get his help. He had to be older than sixty, at the least, which meant he had years to pore over Division 25’s dossiers. They had reports on anything from the terrifying Mega-Scorpions to the rarest of Deadmare models. He had to have seen my file, too! My mind raced as I tried to remember what I’d heard about this titanic trashcan while growing up in Northern Sector’s Steel Ranger Stable, and that’s when it hit me; Nothing. No-one talked about Squad D. Why? Maybe they had been a squad of specialists, which explained why they were so far out from the Northern Blockade. Surely, though, when you had a one ton, ten foot tall battle horse, you’d say something about it...

I’d been silent too long, lost in thought as I weighed everything, mulling over his armor with my gaze. “Look, I didn’t mean to-” I began, trying to forge a sincere-sounding apology.

He abruptly cut me off with his stern voice. “We need to be more careful. If anything were to happen to you, that boy would lose his mother.” I stared at him in disbelief, my mouth packed with the feeling of hot cotton. Was he actually this stupid?

“There, all patched up!” PNK-3 announced, “I’ve removed all identifying marks off of your armor, as you’ve requested, Standta-, whoops! I mean Mister **Stay Strong**! Also, I repaired your auto-mounter!” The bot flittered away, moving over to her troupe of robots. She was still working on their repairs, but had spared enough time to paint them all a warm pastel blue.

“Thank you,” He grunted, carefully standing up. I looked to his flanks, to his brow, and to his chest plate. Every identifying mark displaying rank, division, and identity were scorched off his armor, branding him a deserter. Only one remained, the large ‘D’ on his right shoulder, marking which squad he once belonged to. Just like I had done years ago, he was officially AWOL, with a new moniker to boot. Stay Strong, was it? That won’t last long...

“Stay Strong?” Angus asked, trying his best not to chuckle.

“My new last name. To remember my squad’s wishes.” Standtall said, “I was never attached to the name Stillshot, anyway.”

“They ain’t takin’ you back after defacin’ your armor!” I was beside myself, wondering why I cared one iota of buck. I was so confounded by these new feelings that I couldn’t focus enough to hate glare at the sulking Keena between his tree trunk legs! My *modus operandi* is “No bucks given”, and here I was, wondering why I couldn’t hold all these bucks I now gave. The chain smoking party clown in my head (conscience) had chosen poorly what to juggle for the first time: +2 Flaming Chainsaws of Guilt. (I really had to stop giving Rebel *Bunkers and Badasses* source books, his terminology was enriching my internal monologue. That, and everypony knew 3.5 Pathtrotter was far superior to the later installments.)

“If I return, I will be issued another squad,” the newly monickered Standtall Staystrong countered, “I’m rather attached to my last one.” Was that vomit welling up inside, or a newfound respect for the ranger I’d ultimately wronged? Or maybe, just maybe, that ache was guilt worming its way into my cold, jaded heart. I felt he knew and it scared me. Squad D had no history on the records, which meant they had a lot of it that would never be told. Most his squad had died, but they had taken on over one-hundred Striders and put a considerable dent in those numbers. There was no way the townies had managed to put down that many, so that meant each Ranger had to have taken at least ten down before biting the bit and seeing blue skies. And now he was AWOL--and there was no way Haywire was going to let a piece of work like Standtall take leave. They’d come for him and I didn’t want to be anywhere near him when they did.

Concealing my feelings was easy, snort up some snot, turn my head, spit, and wipe my lips with a cruel chortle, giving him the empty promise that I’d be a bit more careful. Not like I’d be able to keep it, going to the corner store trader for milk was sometimes as dangerous as stealing candy-apples from the Baker Barbarians. There were no free meals, and no mission was a milk-run.

“Y’sahd ye ken abit what’s gonnae oan?” Angus interjected, earning my eternal gratitude. Now full on meat, he was raring to go, palming the massive head of his weird rocket propelled hammer. It was one of the most curious weapons I’d ever seen, but it never pays to be too curious, especially in the wasteland. Curiosity can kill.

“I don’t have time to explain classified intel to civvies,” Standtall grouched in an authoritative manner, mirrored by his previous affiliation as a Steel Ranger. My derisive snort caught the creak of his armor’s movement as he settled his gaze on me.

“Once a hardass, always a hardass,” I sniped. “I bet you don’t know buck.” Likely, he knew both Buck and Jack Shit. If there was one thing I knew, it was that this old nag had been around. Now I had to remember what lies I’ve told.

Standtall gave a defeated, sour grunt. “The song we’re hearing is the Suicide Symphony.” He paused for a moment, as if that’d be enough, but given our collection of blank stares, he cleared his throat and continued. “It was thought to be a myth, explaining the mass suicides that devastated the South-West for years, claiming small settlements. Every report was the same. Rolling fog. Paranoia. Irrational behavior. Anger. Violence.” He took a moment in his succinct explanation to prod Keena with a hoof. “Preys on guilt.” The horsebird flinched, her head in her talons, her failure to compose herself evident as she rocked back and forth, muttering a useless prayer. It didn’t make me any less mad right now, I postulated angry glares, like daggers, in lieu of spitting at the hippogriff.

“She has lots to feel guilty for,” I growled. Keena shot me this look of primal sadness--And I almost regretted what I’d just said. I’d rather be shot with a bullet than that look.

“There’s more than one Gravelord in there,” *‘Stay Strong’* continued, “There are more leads on fresh water springs in Detroit than on the elusive Gravelords. However, I know this one personally. His name is Organ Grinder. We have a history.”

“Lemme guess, wiped a squad?” I hazarded a guess sarcastically, rolling my head back.

The old Ranger merely nodded solemnly.

“That’s the history,” he grunted, “Still, his power won’t work if you don’t hear it.”

“Sae wa didne affeck me?” Bayed Angus.

“Hazard a guess,” the metal titan hypothesized, drumming his hoof thoughtfully into the ground a moment, “I’d say the countless years of enthusiastic explosives experience rendered your senses too dull to be affected.” Unapologetic and to the point, as usual. “Couple that with a Minotaur’s natural spell resistance, then it’s no wonder the Suicide Symphony had no effect on you.” His explanation concluded with a curt nod, that was the end of that. Even if Angus wasn’t completely convinced, Standtall was already moving on.

He proceeded to point at PNK-3, “Their magic is also nullified by positive emotions.”

“BAAAAAH! BAAAAH!” Baha interrupted, opening his mouth wide to make loud, obnoxious calls at the Steel Ranger. He continued to make these noises, until the metal clad horse placed the hefty weight of his attention upon him.

“What?” ‘Standtall grumbled.

“He's jist tryin' tae ask a queshton!” Angus bellowed, “Kin't nae undr'stand im? He's sae will pronoonced.”

We all stared. Angus eventually got the hint.

“E's asskin ef weh kin' laff em ta deff.” Angus sighed, slapping his forehead with his meaty palm.

“Laugh 'em to deafness? Oh, no, that'd just be silly!” PNK-3 interjected with a soft giggle. “It just irritates them to the precipice of madness, choking them off from their stolid thoughts until they start self-mutilating, are driven away, or destroy the source of laughter!” She took a moment's pause from putting another layer of pastel blue paint on her robotic companions to swivel in our direction, then flittered between each of us in turn. “Giggle. At. The. Ghoulies.”

Another squeal of laughter flattened my ears to my head as I screwed my eyes shut tightly. “That explains the canned laughter, but why're you painting them laugh-factories blue?” From the Protecta Ponies to the odd, mostly limbless Mr. Handy, they were all decorated in matching pastel blues, and at least for posterity's sake, I wanted to know why.

“Why wouldn't I paint them blue? Of course I'd paint them blue! It's only obvious that I'd paint them blue! It's all part of the plan!” Was the only response I received before the spritebot went back to her work, rearming the damaged Mr. Handy with a single functioning pie slicer. “We really need to be going soon, Captain Kettle might need back-up. Or front-up. Or sidekicks. All depends on the direction we come from!”

I snorted. “Typical of him, always the center of every little skirmish, the violent little time

vampire.” With a groan and the creaking of sore joints, I pushed myself up, turning my head to spit another bloody lugey. It tasted kinda like bacon. “Let’s get this over with--KEENA! You take point.” That’d been the first thing I’d said to her since our little incident, and she was quick to respond, her sullen eyes seeking me out as her head crest peaked. Threading herself through that Steel Ranger’s massive legs, she held onto one for balance.

“Are you trying to get me killed?” Keena squawked, “What if we hit another spell or trap?”

Well, I didn’t want to tell her the obvious, but if we hit another spell field that turned her turncoat, she’d find her new coat color to be red. The same would probably happen if we ran into a trap.

“Then you’ll find it first?” I glowered, at the end of my sanity rope. Trust wasn’t one of my strong points, especially after taking a quarter mag’s worth of friendly fire. I made room for my little tyke bomb on the metal horse and wedged the squirming foal between my legs. “Sit tight, Rebel.” I grumbled, patting his messy little mane.

Keena didn’t want to take full responsibility for her horrid spell resistance, feeling as though the situation called for leniency. In my book, it didn’t.

“If you would feel better, I can stay behind and wait here,” she offered.

“I ain’t showin’ you ass to catch another piercin’.” I hissed like an agitated Viper. “And I ain’t doin’ you the favor of doin’ your job, squab!”

“My job?” With that muddled mind of hers, it was a wonder she remembered why she joined us in the first place. “Alright, I’ll take point!” She clucked, snatching her weapon from the ranger’s possession and taking flight, circling overhead. She waited until we chose a path. “You should watch your language around Rebel,” Here we go, she’s right back to lecturing.

“Screw you,” Rebel huffed at Keena. Now that, that made me chortle, seeing Keena’s perplexed expression turn to indignant disgust. I am best parent. Patting Rebel on the head, I reinforced these important values in him.

“Can we just get moving?” Keena whined. Yeah, it didn’t even take any weird music for us to

dislike each other. It made me smile.

“Oh, are we going now?” The pink spritebot chirped, zipping ahead. The small squad of robots kept a tight perimeter around us, preparing to move out. Stay Strong turned to give me a look which was probably questioning, under that featureless helmet.

“If that thing’s here,” I muttered with a jab of my snout in PNK-3’s direction, “Steelgraft can’t be far off. She’ll know where he is.” The last thing I wanted tagging along was an old M.O.M. robot with personality quirks and her band of laughing robots announcing us to every threat in a ten mile radius. There was no other recourse, we needed her--and I hated it, but we did not have the luxury of time to squabble over choice company.

Despite clunking Standtall on the head multiple times with the rifle barrel, he refused to budge. “Come on, giddy up, Toaster-Ass!”

Heaving a sigh with some effort, the Ranger shook his head rustily, “The fog’s too thick to see. My map-system’s still down.” There was likely a jamming signal being emitted by one of the Gravelords, one that laughter alone couldn’t disperse. We didn’t have time to stand around waiting for his armor to reboot a tertiary system, but I did begrudgingly wait the fifteen or twenty seconds for his flood lights to flicker back on. The high intensity beam cleaved ahead far enough for us to see shadows of the great piles of scrap all around the clearing.

“Lead the way, rust ball,” I barked at PNK-3.

“You know,” PNk-3 chirped, moving ahead, “I do have a name!”

I rolled my eyes hard, giving a shallow grunt of ‘whatever’. Her name may have well been “Target Practice” because it didn’t take long before the spritebot lead us into a dead-end. It commented on her direction glibly, “Well, I thought it was this way.” We about faced and were soon lead down yet another winding path that ended with a collapsed pile of scrap blocking our way.

“Sour punch! This was the way Steelgraft went, but now the scrap’s collapsed in the way.” PNK-3 chimed, altogether too happily.

“Angus, blast it,” I decided.

“No kin dae, lass, tay mooooch shakin' an' we coods bury oorselves in roosted scrap,” Angus rumbled, scratching under his chin as he appraised the size of the obstacle. The wall of toppled scrap was double his height over his horn tips and we had no idea how thick it could be.

Baha bayed in agreement--Or just to be noisy. I wasn't sure which.

Keena reported from her vantage point that the fog was scraping the tops of the scrap piles, going far above where normal fog would dwell. She tried not to venture too far from the protective aura of the robotic canned laughter, even so, she returned with a haunted look in her eyes. “I have a terrible feeling, I do! Something bad's going to happen.” She said to noone in particular.

“What, again?” I muttered. “At least yah didn't say: ‘everythin's gonna work out’.” I wasn't exactly superstitious, but I wasn't against not tempting Fate to pile it on.

“But everything's going to be okiday! It isn't so bad!” PNK-3 blurted. “And it could always be worse! I mean, it could rain! And nopony(or non-pony) brought an umbrella.”

“And now we're doomed. Thanks for jinxing us, Bullet Magnet,” I said.

“That's still not my name,” PNK-3 chimed.

In a matter of minutes my patience for the metal orb went from tolerance to wanting to blast it with the Compensator. It might actually be worth it, and I would have, if not for its previous work in dispelling the **Suicide Symphony**.

I wish our little herd would be with me on this, but I was the only one to groan at the robot. “Shut up!” I snapped. “Make yourself useful n' uninstall yer gob!”

“Mom,” Rebel snorted, “Hardware doesn't work dat way.”

“I know.” I grit my teeth, calming myself by slicking up my mohawk. “I. Know.”

We tried a way around the wreckage, but we ended up getting turned around, arriving at a familiar pile of dead raiders and a dwindling fire pit. “Wrong again,” PNK-3 squeaked, once again, we’d have to backtrack. “Maybe third time’s the charm!”

Another route led us around in a loop until: “Oh, I think I remember now!”

“Do you now?” I snarled in disbelief. “This place is a maze!”

“Labyrinth, actually. The suicide Symphony is moving the scrap piles around. We’re on the same(and only) path!” PNK-3 beeped a bit too cheerfully. That would have been nice to know five minutes ago! My lower eyelid twitched in agitation, the frequency of my muscle spasm increasing as the bauble closed the distance between us. I found it annoying, but my expression of sour taste and foul smell combined didn’t register at all for the robotic retard. Merrily, it invaded my space and pressed its cool metal dome against my cheek.

“How d’we get aroun’ the spell, Klunktard?” I groaned, trying to distance my face from the cold metal, but perspiration had adhered the consarned thing to my face with frost!

“I don’t know who this Klunktard is,” PNK-3 snickered, “But I do know they don’t know what I just remembered. Just now!”

I heaved a defeated sigh.

“How do we get around the spell’s effects, PNK-3?” Standtall requested.

“I am so glad you asked, Double S!” PNK-3 chortled, “Gangrene here’s talkin’ to someone named Klunktard!” It lowered its voice to whisper as if telling a deep, dark secret, “I think she’s going crazy.”

“You’re frozen to my face an’ I kin hear yah.” I reminded her.

“Wow, she has good hearing.” PNK-3 gasped.

“Oche, wee bauble lass, the Labyrinth?” Angus pushed.

“Oh! The only way to break it is with a minotaur and an **Enchanted Ball of Twine™**!” PNK-3 announced. “Fortunately for us, we have a minotaur in the party!”

“How does that even work?” Rebel Riot asked incredulously.

“Labyrinths need minotaurs! And something, something, string!” PNK-3 chirped. “Hey, I don’t make the rules, I just bend them.”

It sounded just like the mare that lead the Ministry of Morale, that stupid pink pony whose polka music would forever haunt the wasteland. The M.O.M. was by far one of the worst ministries, second only to the Ministry of Peace. For obvious reasons. My least favorite subject was history, and now a piece of history best left fragged was glued to my cheek!

Unable to dislodge the spritebot, I fired a sigh, tossing myself over my rifle stock, “Is that it, then? Where the buck’re we supposed to get enchante--”

“Go’ it!” Angus bellowed triumphantly as he victoriously pulled a ball of golden twine from his kilt purse thing. I didn’t know what it was called, it was like a backwards fanny pack and I’m an ignorant city mare. A cockpurse?

“How th’buck? You got an **Enchanted Ball of Twine™**? Seriously?” I said, astounded.

Angus looked insulted, “ ‘Course, wot kinda Manotaur ye think I be?”

“A prepared one,” Standtall offered. Angus nodded in agreement. Baha bayed.

While the Minotaur unwinded a short length of the shimmer gold twin, he began to explain why

he had it, and a bit about its purpose. “Uir haem in th' stoatin Macintosh Moontains, **Belegost**, is protected by a labyrinth sic' as thes.” He set the partially unraveled ball of twine down, the other end was tethered off to one of Baha's short horns. “E'ry macitaur wort' their black powder has a baa o' glittergauld,” Angus finished, now waiting expectantly.

Nothing happened.

“I'm sure I'm still forgetting something!” PNK-3 thought aloud.

This time, I was not the only one to groan.

“What now?!” I demanded, only occasionally pushing on PNK-3 in effort to dislodge her from my cheek at this point.

After a cursory inspection, Angus sighed, “Its enchantment main hae rin its coorse. It'll need a new a un.”

I had more expectant eyes on me than the freshest piece of meat in a raider pile.

“What?” I barked, “D'yah think I know how to enchant string?”

“You're the only unicorn here.” Standtall pointed out casually.

“I'm a unicorn? Holy plop-balls, I didn't know! thanks fer point'n that out, Sir Points-Out-The-Obvious, but that doesn't mean I know the spell!” I blurted. “Maybe iff'n I had the Spellbo--”

WHAM! Something heavy and book-like landed on top of my head.

“Whoops!” PNK-3 squeaked, “Sorry! Didn't mean to materialize that there.”

Blinking the stars from my eyes, I levitated the old leatherbound tome off my head and nursed my new, throbbing goose egg. It was a simple, ordinary looking book, with an unusual heft to it, unmarked save for a circled glyph on the front with a set of stars set inside, 42 points in all. It was easy to tell what it was; a personal Grimoire, and judging by its thickness and weight, it had belonged to a notable and powerful unicorn. And judging by the cutie mark in the glyph mark, it was obvious who it had belonged to.

Twilight Sparkle.

“Where’d yah git this?” I asked, leafing through the pages. Each one was filled with spells far beyond my understanding, though the legible, clean notations along the side margins clued me in on their purpose. Most of the spells being researched, especially towards the end were focused on restoration magic, and, surprisingly enough, herbology and plant growth spells.

“I borrowed it,” PNK-3 chimed. “I doggy-eared the page you’re looking for.”

There, just like she’d said, the aforementioned folded corner with an object enchantment on the same page. What was written in the margin gave me pause; *“Sometimes I wonder if these years have taken the best parts of me away, that my better half is lost. I cannot find you in this life, because you are gone, but maybe in the next I’ll find you. Sincerely, Your Maripony.”* That note, in ink that was faded, clearly a century old, it spoke what haunted my dreams. It seems before everything went up in balefire, Twilight had found and lost love, and wrote a spell to find their better half.

Coincidence, it had to just be a coincidence. When my disbelieving blinks refused to make the notation in the margin cease to exist, I chose to ignore it and move onto the spell itself. It was a Recall Ally spell, specifically for finding lost friends or loved ones, most notably utilized in civilian search and rescues. I’d seen the spell used to track down Rangers that were missing in action. Usually, the search would end at a corpse stripped of its armor, or, in my case, an abandoned weapon and a cold trail. Yet this spell was different, it had changes to the glyph denoting ‘ally’ changing it’s meaning altogether.

It wasn’t a Recall Ally spell anymore, it was something more meaningful. Anyone that cast the spell would be lead to their hero--To the one pony that could save them from despair and darkness. But she was dead, and this spell would only lead me to her unmarked grave...Wouldn’t it?

“A civilian able to read advanced magical spells,” the aged, massive Steel Ranger broke my thoughts with the subtlety of a balefire bomb. “Perhaps you’re just good at acting.”

By the time I'd collected my mental fortitude to memorize the spell, my heart was still bottomed out in my guts. "You wanna exchange origin stories or put an end to this chapter of our lives?" I asked, slamming the book shut pointedly. The book evaporated, as if it had been deleted block by block, the fragments flying towards a small, sparkling diode that had extended from PNK-3's chassis.

"Hey! I wasn't done wit dat!" I barked at PNK-3. "I wanted tah read more later!"

"It's not like you were gonna keep the book. It's on La-o-ooo-ooan~" PNK-3 sing-songed.

"You just don't quit," Standtall observed, even his patience weathered. Maybe I should just start referring to him as S to the S? Or SS? No, let's not get that casual with him. Staystrong or Standtall, he'd answer to either, anyway.

"I know, right? She's an irritation!" I agreed, my new copacetic nature with the Ranger was alright as long as he disliked the bot as much as I did. This one time.

"I meant you," he growled, "Try to be a little more patient."

"What?!" I blurted, the eye-twitch returning with a pitted vengeance. "We don't have time for patience! Steelgraft--"

"Kin hauld his ain, lass."

"Um, I know you don't care what I think," Keena began, fluttering off a generous distance to my left, "But you should just cast the spell, you know, the whole rescuing the choir who can't hold their own? And Steelgraft, I guess?" The young hippogriff wrung her talons together, beseeching me with round, pitiful eyes.

"Mom, they're kinda right. Just cast the damn spell already." *Et tu*, Rebel Riot? *Et tu*?

"Hey," PNK-3 spoke up, "Don't gang up on her, she's just in character!" Just what I needed, to be

defended by that piece of junk. That probably pissed me off the most.

“Fine!” I agreed, if only to shut them all up. I went to cast my spell, a hazy green aura sleeving my horn, causing a headache to crawl from my temples to the front of my sinuses. The spell was a bit more complex, but it was well within my abilities. I hoped.

Slowly, the shadows of the junkyard swiveled and shifted as the illusion faded. Then the goat went flying off in a random direction, letting out an ecstatic, bewildered bleat as the freshly enchanted twine propelled him towards whatever the spell was supposed to lead us to.

A hero? My hero. Was that stitched up goody-two-hooves really my hero? I was so screwed.

“Oche, balder n’ Broomstone! Tied off th’ wron’ end!” Angus shouted as he barreled away after his companion. “Ol’ oan, Baha! I’mma comin’!”

Seven. I counted seven piles of junk in this large junkyard, all surrounding the central clearing we were in. It wasn’t a maze at all, but an innocuous collection of scrap. Unease peppered my mood with dread, if one of the Deadmare could turn a junkyard into a seemingly endless maze, then, what good would my magic be against them?

What good would any of us be against them?

“Follow that goat!” Squealed the spritebot, tearing itself away from my cheek to buzz around with jubilant joy-like movements. A happy, delightful target with a fetching patch of yellow fur frozen to its carapace. Reeling back, I slipped off my rifle, clasping my searing cheek.

Clunk.

Filled with seething fire, I took hold of my weapon and raised the barrel, training it on the fluttering orb. A single flicker of my horn yielded a dry click, and soon after, a chuckle from the Ranger upon whom the weapon was mounted.

“Safety,” the Ranger cattily purred, “It will be disengaged when you find an appropriate target.”

Disarmed at his words, and literally by his actions, I could only lean against my rifle while our small, dysfunctional caravan chased the magically propelled goat into the ruins of the junkyard, winding a path around piles of long defunct robots and Robronco appliances.

It was a treasure trove of rusted scrap and tetanus. At a better time, Rebel Riot would be dashing about, vibrant with the spark of curiosity as he dissected every make and model the junkyard had to offer. Now he was shivering, clinging to my chest tightly and shutting out the world around him. I busied myself with comforting him, neglecting the idiot ball blathering incessantly about what she had been doing all day, up until we arrived to be included in the retelling.

--And after I was done reprogramming the robots to not attack him on sight, he ran off to fight the bad guys!" PNK-3 finished, all without pause, in a matter of a minute she'd told us the entire story. Well, almost the entire story. "Oh! And then you guys showed up! Want me to tell you all about that?"

"NO!" I shouted.

"Ol' oan lil buddy!" Angus mooed, panting as he doubled over. "Wot spell ye cast? He's goin' faster n' th' last pickled onion at a' Moot."

While I reassured Angus I'd cast a simple enough spell, just that, well, I had no idea how the enchantment would have reacted with the twine, Standtall decided to piss me off. "I'd love to hear more," he rumbled to PNK-3. My eye twitched.

"You got it!" PNK-3 paused briefly. "Where was I?"

"You were at the part where I decide to shoot myself," I snarked.

"But we already told that part of the story," PNK-3 contemplated. "Oh, are we almost there?" I bruised my forehead with how hard I just face-hoofed.

"I'm not losing anymore slack, and I can see Baha up just ahead," Keena chirped. She had swooped down and snatched up the other end of the twine ball, making sure we'd be able to follow the

gleaming tether without stepping on it. How moderately useful.

Angus was already up ahead, assisting the stunned goat. He peeled Baha from his restful face-plant and set him on his haunches. Just as we caught up, another horror was thrust upon us. The **Symphony**'s faint, deadly music died off, the wind went still, and finally, just before it eroded my last nerve, the robots' canned laughter drifted away too.

With sound dead in the air, the fog dissipated, rising off the coals of cold ground, curling into tattered rags. Climbing out from the mists was the oppressive structure of smokestacks and glowing windows, leering at us with bared, gated teeth. A roaring fire burned, licking out of the gaping windows, gilded with blazing heat. It was a factory, or had been a factory at one point. Now it was a hellish conflagration, filling the air with the scent of charred flesh and burning oil.

"The music stopped," PNK-3 broke the silence.

"The children!" Screeched Keena, swooping in thoughtlessly. I was too late to snag her with my magic, but Angus had managed to seize the twine and reel her back in.

"Hauld oan, lassie, yoo'll only gie yerself kill't!" Bellowed Angus, his grip slipping on sweat. Like a frantic kite caught in an updraft, Keena tugged the minotaur about, trying to unwind her talons from the glowing line.

"The music stopped," PNK-3 reiterated while the rest of us got to more important business. Calming Keena down was a chore, and it took both Angus and Stay Strong to pin her down. No words would reach her, Keena's eyes were filmed over with concern, fear, and hopelessness. The bitter mare in me wanted to laugh, to find joy that another creature hurt like I did, but the sensible creature I was tugged the corners of my lips into a neutral frown.

"I'm sorry, Keena, but if they're in there, there ain't nothin' that can be done." I said, watching the pyre with my own aching fear. Keena must have not heard me, not wanted to believe me, or a combination of the two, because she never stopped struggling. The screams we heard coming from inside the building only renewed her dedication to floundering.

Screams of agony overcame the crackling fire before they too were silenced by the flames.

“There are others still alive in there.” Standtall mumbled. “Not for long.”

“We hae tae dae somethin’.” Angus agreed, relinquishing his grip from Keena. Stay Strong had to apply more weight to keep the hippogriff from flying off, and the Ranger grunted in displeasure at Angus. “Aam gonnae in thaur,” the meat stack declared, shouldering his hammer. “Doobt tis hafter n’ tae Gran Ferge.”

“You won’t make it to the door,” Stay Strong argued. Reluctantly, I agreed with a curt nod, though most of my focus had gone to calming Keena down.

“Oh sweet, Merciful Luna...” Keena wouldn’t give it a rest. She was worthless in her condition.

Too stubborn to listen, the Minotaur ventured as far as he could before the heat drove him off, which was a considerable distance, less than a stone’s throw from the front door. When he returned to us, singed and coughing smoke, he mumbled about the doors and windows being melted to their frames.

“We’re not getting in through the front door, if we’re getting in at all.” Stay Strong said passively. “But I already knew that without you nearly causing a backdraft.” Those words alone made the minotaur’s frown deepen, the creases in his face hard as stone. He had a way of getting under the skin, and the Minotaur’s thick hide was no exception. Personally, I didn’t want to be riding the Steel Ranger when the six-hundred pound cowman decided to beat him to death with his own helmet.

“The music stopped,” PNK-3 reiterated for the third time.

“Shut up,” I snarled, “Who cares? I gots 99 worries and a beat ain’t one.”

“No, she’s right,” Standtall mumbled. “The music stopped.” He’d gone crazy, he must have gone crazy. I was riding on a crazy horse. “The **Suicide Symphony** was a deterrent meant to stop anyone that might interfere.” Okay, he wasn’t crazy, I just couldn’t comprehend the crazy pink robot like he could. Which might make him crazier than me.

“Interfere with what?” I asked, knowing the answer would be far south of good news.

“Their fight with Steelgraft,” PNK-3 said solemnly. “That’s the most likely reason why they’d stop maintaining the music.”

“Maybe he won?” Rebel interjected. His naivety was refreshing, and I rewarded his dose of sunshine with a pat to the head.

“Not even he could beat those odds, not without his friends to even them.” A robot sounding genuinely sad, that was the day when I thought pigs would fly. Scanning the horizon, I only saw smoke. “He should have never gone alone.”

“We ain’t friends,” I grunted, “We have an arrangement.” That dead buck owed me plenty, and I couldn’t collect if he was dead or broken, so it was in my best interests to save him. “Can’t speak for the others, they hardly know him.” Angus had wanted to escape chores, Keena had her reasons, and the Steel Ranger was enigmatic about his own. Made me a bit uneasy, the Ranger would be difficult to be rid of, but I could probably give him the slip.

PNK-3 remained silent for an intensely pregnant pause, finally turning to me to speak in a low, serious tone. “If you’re going to save your not-friend, you best hurry. Negative outcomes are multiplying by the second.” Unknowns were a worry, and this bot was giving me lotsa unknowns. Before I could even utter a single syllable, the robot and its flamboyant entourage of pastel junkbots laid claim to separate lop-sided junkpiles and began digging in.

“She won’t be any use,” I muttered, already turning my attention to the other problem child of our little herd, Keena. “And neither will you if you don’t pony up.” My condemning gaze was icy, and the hippogriff, having already ceased her struggling, merely cringed. I was abysmal at these uplifting pep-talks, it wasn’t my forte. My bedside manner was mentioned to be near-flawless, but that was for those ailing actual aches, not accounting for emotional loss. I ain’t a youth counselor. I ain’t a therapist. Fudge pack mules, what would Steelgraft say? He’s good at this. Real good at finding that silver lining or some way to keep trekkin’. Unable and unwilling to think too hard on it, I prepared a simple anesthesia spell and struck Keena with it.

Her cry was cut short as her muscles relaxed, her exhaustion played a factor in the potency of the spell. She instantaneously lost consciousness.

“Wae didja--”

Wanting to save on time, I spoke over any dissent. “Knock-out spell. She’ll jus’ get in the way. Leave her with the tea party.”

“And the foal?” Standtall mentioned.

I patted my lap. My now empty lap. Cuss n’ custard, he had a bad habit of slipping away on me! I’d have to get one of those harness leashes and tie him to my Mother of the Year award. Flicking my eyes about, I withheld my vitriol behind barred teeth. “Buck! Runt! Runt?!”

“Up here,” the colt called down to me. My head followed the voice with such speed I may have slipped a disk, the crack deafening the constant ringing I’d been hearing since Angus had blown up the eatery in town. All eyes on him, the powder blue ass-pain hung from the cockpit of a tall salvage crane. “I think it still works!”

“He’s quick,” Commented Standtall. That wasn’t a compliment, as soon, the aging Ranger added a firm, “To be a nuisance.”

CLUNK.

“What’s he dae’in up thaur?” Angus wondered.

“That’s what I’d like to know!” At wit’s end, I stood up, cupping my hooves over my snout. “Get down from there dis instant, you’re givin’ me a heart attack!” Rebel, as usual, took no time in ignoring my demands and instead did as he pleased. If I hadn’t knocked out our flier, I could have sent her up to snatch him! Cursing my short sightedness, I dropped from my mount and made for the crane. “I swear, if I gotta come up there and get you!”

The engine turned over, sputtered, and died. Rebel, seeming to have expected this, left the cockpit quickly, an oversized wrench clenched between his teeth. “You’re grounded!” I shrieked, “One week!” He continued on, undaunted. “Two weeks!” He broke the lock on the crane’s engine compartment and pried it open. “A year!” He cast me a spiteful look and scrambled inside.

Rebel's banging echoed from the belly of the beast. After clanging around for a bit, he popped out, his face smeared with great streaks of grease. He spat out his spanner and made way for the cockpit once again, the engine turned over and stuttered to life.

By now, I'd begun scaling the salvage crane's rickety ladder, concocting punishments with every painful rung I put beneath me. Make him stand outside with a bucket of water on his head? Classic. Spanking? Barbaric. Both at the same time? Perfect! An eerily disquieting moan of metal signaled an abrupt stop to my thoughts, replacing them with frantic fear as the rung I had rested a majority of my weight on gave way. The next one did not fare much better, and by the fourth, I felt a diet was in order. My warring thoughts with developing anorexia aside, I did manage to land without harm on my fat(Not really) ass. Pain struck like lightning up my backside, making me clench my teeth and eyes. **Twitcha-Twitch!** The lower half of the ladder snapped free, teetering back towards me. I reflexively shielded myself, a rather weak, flimsy barrier about the strength and thickness of an eggshell.

Crap!

In the fraction of a second it took for me to wish I'd spent the last precious moment dodging, a flash of heat cut through the air over my barrier, shattering it, but also launching the mangled ladder a safe distance where it landed against a pile of scrap. I blinked a few times, rubbing my ears as the ringing bells squealed in my head--Angus's rocket maul was louder than a Vertibuck in take-off and twice as fast. Fortunate for me, cuz he just saved my hide.

"So," Standtall began, his tone bemused yet condescending, like a drill sergeant between elation and contempt at the shortcomings of a subordinate, "You knock out our only flier, then lose your child and nearly die all in the span of a minute." He loomed over me again as he took a place next to Angus. "That aside, I think the kid's onto something."

Angus agreed with a firm 'aye' as his head tilted upwards.

Twitcha-Twitch. What was up with these damn spasms? They were getting more frequent.

Rebel Riot had managed to get the crane working again, and the hundreds of caps and hours playing arcade games in the Highscore Arcade had served him in figuring out the controls. It only took him half a minute to drop a corrugated steel cargo container too close for comfort.

“Watch it!” I barked.

“Sorry!” Rebel excused himself, “It’s kinda my first time--Now stop complainin’, get inside! Steelgraft’s cornered on the catwalk n’ he’s short on time!” Smart runt, got a vantage point and a solution at the same time!

“You heard ‘em!” I exclaimed, rising up to my hooves. “Angus, pop the container open! We’re gonna be a priority shipment!” The sound of the gears turning was audible, but it was the crane, not the space between Angus’s ears making the racket. Angus gave a grunt and moved to peel the metal doors open, a gust of foul, moldy air hissed out as the seal broke. I expected dead bodies, a bunch of junk, or something mundane to tumble out, instead there were, of all things, in the entirety of the cargo container, a single box of (long)discontinued novelty cereal and a single bottle cap balanced on the box top.

The brand? Buck-Blow, the most fiber intense cereal ever made. It was also good as fertilizer, the box also boasted. I was both underwhelmed and a bit amused.

“Oh,” I heard PNK-3 say as she appeared over my shoulder, “That must be because I’m in the party. The wasteland’s such a weird place sometimes.”

Hairs on the back of my neck stood on end and this overwhelming feeling of something coming could not be quelled. Whatever it was, it would be a doozy. I never used the word doozy, it’d never been part of my vocabulary until just recently. My life was plagued by the weird and the confusing, and I found myself briefly reflecting on how I’d gotten here. What a week.

The shipping container was barely tall enough to fit Standtall, and Angus would be forced to crouch down due to his horns--If he hadn’t already excused himself from coming along.

“Me an’ heights arenae keen oan seein’ each other anymair,” Angus slurred, tipping his head back as he quaffed from his flask. “Guid luck.”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me, a Macitaur afraid a heights?” I questioned.

PNK-3 squealed with joy, “That means there’s room for me!”

“Reconsider!” I begged.

“There’s barely enough room for me to squeeze in there,” Standtall said. “You on my back is already pushing it, this is our part to play, Gangrene.”

“Some one's got tae babysit th' flier an' th' runt,” Angus added. “An’ close th’ container.”

“Besides, do you want to be in a tight, enclosed space with an eight foot tall, six hundred pound minotaur laden with ‘party favors’?” PNK-3 weighed in. I’d rather be in a footlocker with a small band of radroaches playing mariachi music than be in a steel crate with the irritating broken down pink robot with the plastic, unwavering smile. Of course, I kept this comment to myself, I already knew which side a majority of those around me would take, and I was more than willing to capitulate rather than fight another losing battle.

“We gonna sit here flappin’ our gums or git it over with?” I groused, already in the middle of scaling my way back up my big metal gun platform with legs. PNK-3 was already inside, laughing at the quips on the cereal box’s label.

“A bowl will move your bowels! Hee! Classic.”

“Please keep it down,” I groaned.

“Oki-Doki-Loki!” the robot chimed, reducing her laughter to barely contained snickering.

“I really hate--What day is it?”

“Wednesday!” PNK-3 squeaked. “I think. Or was it thursday? Oh, no, not yet--Steelgraft’s necklace is still on! Silly me, it must be Wednesday--Or did it just turn Thursday? Oh...That’s not good...”

“Auch, a guid dae tae die, Eitter un.” Angus heaved as he sealed us inside the container.

There were three bangs outside, each one made me jump, my heart hitting rock bottom when I felt the container rise. The centenarian metal crate creaked, groaned, and complained as its integrity was tested for the first time in who knows how long. A tense crackle of radio static echoed from PNK-3's speakers, Rebel's voice coming over tinnily. He still had his father's old radio, and when I had a receiver for it, I'd always chat with him and the kids while I was out stalking marks.

"Here's the plan; swing yah in, break the glass, ease off tha backdraft, stick yah in and yah take the rest."

"Oh, are we doing the Pony Pokey?" PNK-3 asked, nearly running over Rebel with her words. "Are we gonna shake it all about?"

"No," I said through gritted teeth, mostly from nerves, but a hint of annoyance tainted my words, "I pop whatever's cornered the moron, hope it dies, an' have Steelgraft jump in." My jaw was hurting, not as much as the rest of me, but I had to clench them to keep the rattle out. To focus, to overcome my fear. It was this or nothing--This or another nightmare to lose sleep over. Curbstomp's uneven smile, the trust he had in me, and how easily I'd let him go; how easy I'd put him in harm's way to save my own hide.

Cool dampness trickled down my cheek, and I wiped my brow only to curse. It wasn't sweat. This was the stupidest thing I'd ever done, certainly the riskiest. I was so afraid. The present company wouldn't notice, I hoped, the noisy container and mindfulness on task would deprive them of any peripheral vision.

"It's perfectly natural to be afraid." Standtall rumbled.

DAMNIT.

I stayed silent, hoping Standtall wouldn't press on, but he just twisted it in the wound.

"This is pretty dangerous, you'd have to be pretty crazy to not be afraid."

After a moment's silence, when the container jolted to a stop, at the apex of its height, I found the strength to speak--Honestly--For the first time to the Ranger.

“That’s not why I’m scared,” I told him, “What if I miss?”

“You won’t,” Standtall said. There was a dull tug at the Compensator’s base as the safety disengaged and the trigger lock slide down. He said nothing else, but the weight of his words and the way he effortless threw them spoke volumes. The fool trusted me, he trusted me and he didn’t even know. He thought the enemy that’d taken yet another squad from him was going to be just beyond the door when it opened, but the one that’d put his squad there was with him.

The cargo container shifted backwards, away from the building. We’d need enough momentum to crash right through without getting stuck, Rebel had said as much through PNK-3’s speaker. He called for us to prepare ourselves for impact. I could hear the old engine of the crane stutter and growl, the motions of the crate were unstable and uneven. A century without maintenance had left it stiff and rusted.

“This gonna’ be rough n’ jaggy! The darn thing handles like a three legged rad-bug,” said Rebel Riot. I tensed, anticipating the swing and the impact that would follow.

“He made his choice,” I bargained with myself, keeping these thoughts to myself. *“He made the choice to follow a mare that never existed.”* Daisy Chain. A fake ranger, one concocted on the spur of a moment, one that only an idiot would believe. Why think about it now?! There were a million other things to concern myself with. I was in a steel box suspended two stories over the ground about to be slung into an inferno, and here I was, unable to think of anything else.

Standtall was no idiot, a hardass, but not an idiot--He’d dropped the act as soon as his squad had died, when he had nothing left to give. Nothing left to lose. I suspected he knew, but he silently played along to keep the peace between us. The old ranger was never around base, I’d never even heard whispers of Division 25’s Juggernaut. I did remember one thing, actually. One thing I heard about D Squad from my father as he was doling out punishment for insubordination--He’d used assignment to D Squad as a threat, called it “Where dreamers go to die.” I never thought about it too hard, not before, the closest I’d ever been to the checkpoint D Squad routined was several hundred yards with a sniper scope--It’d always been easier to take the scenic route around, that is, until time became so crucial as to try to slip by inconspicuously. They were never on base, never talked about, and apparently always active, deployed, and refilled from the rank and file as necessary. Likely with anypony my father wanted to be rid of. If I wasn’t his daughter, what were the chances I would have ended up in Squad D myself?

Nary a thought was given them, they were just an obstacle, something to be avoided. I hated

them, what they represented, where they came from, but then Standtall ruined it. Those rangers died for ponies they were told were barely savages. Standtall and his unit made a sacrifice so others could live, however few.

The wasteland demanded its sacrifices. That was his. She was mine.

“Brace yourselves!” Rebel warned.

As the cargo container swung forward, I shouldered the rifle and took a deep breath. The pit in my stomach dropped away, along with the hate I held for Standtall. We all make sacrifices, every single day there’s a little less left to lose. Less reasons to love and laugh, more reasons to cry.

Star Racer was right. It’d likely bite me in the ass, but this was one battle I’d fight not just for survival, but to make it up to the rusted old nag. Never would I admit it, but I owed them all this much. I wanted to be that mare, the one Star Racer had fallen in love with.

Just this one time...

Let me be a hero.

Let me be a friend worth fighting for.

What’s this? Going soft on us, Gangrene? Is the wasteland too much? Tut-tut, Heel-face turns tend to lead to death in this genre. But you want that, don’t you? You want to see Star Racer. How blind you’ve been, unable to see what’s before you. Unable to see that nothing is coincidence.

Love really is blind.