

THE

A B C S

of

Fallout
EQUESTRIA

The ABC's of Fallout: Equestria

Synopsis

Stories have powers. After the adventure of the Lightbringer, a small filly will learn this.

These are the twenty-six stories that, drove home the point that anyone can become a legend. You just need to get out there and do something.

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Introduction

By G-Man64

“I should probably start by explaining a little bit about PipBucks.” I said, closing the book in my lap. The Book of Littlepip. I’d only read it once for myself, but when it came to reading it for the groups of fillies and colts who came to my home, I never get enough. The gleam in their eyes as I told them the valiant tale of the Lightbringer always made my day, “Alright little ones, you should run along home. Your parents will be wondering where you ran off to.” The fillies and colts collected their things and filed neatly outside, thanking me for the story. All but one that is.

A small pink and purple unicorn filly sat in rapture on the floor, looking up at me. She wasn’t really a filly, not yet at least. She was younger, and didn’t even have her cutie mark yet. However, her eyes were... hungry. They had that look in them, the kind of look Twilight used to have whenever she’d devour a book. This filly wanted more.

“Miss Fluttershy?” The filly asked in her adorable voice. “Did all that really happen? I mean... it all sounds a bit far fetched. A saviour from a stable who returned the sky to the land? Even I have to admit it’s a little ridiculous.” I smiled softly. Just like Twilight. Always the skeptic.

“Well... I can tell you for sure that it did happen. You know Miss Remedy and Mister Calamity,” I replied. “They were there, during the final battle to bring back the sky.” The filly sighed loudly. I could tell that this wasn’t going to be enough for this one.

“Yeah I suppose so, but there’s other stories out there, right?” she asked. “I’ve heard The Book of Littlepip so many times it’s starting to get old. Aren’t there any other heroes you can tell me about?” I smiled again and put a hoof to my chin, thinking hard. Trotting over to the bookshelf, I began scanning the various books stored there.

“Well,” I said resting my hoof on one book. “There’s the the Ghost of Fifty-Two. That’s a personal favorite of mine. An adorable filly searching for her mother.”

“I already read that one. Don’t you have anything else?” I rolled my eyes and continued on down the titles. My hoof stopped at a book simply titled ‘Security’.

“Well...” I said cringing, “there’s...” my hoof left the book named ‘Security’ and continued on.

She’s way too young for that one. I thought to myself. I continued along until a particular book caught my eye, The spine of the book said “ABC’s.” I pulled it out with my teeth and trotted over to the table. Resting the book carefully on it, I motioned for the filly to join me.

“How about this one?”

“But I already know my ABC’s,” the filly said, her lip curling into an adorable pout. The children always did know how to get me. “Don’t treat me like a little foal.”

“Of course not little one,” I said smiling. “Tell me... do you know what an anthology is?”

“No.”

“Well, an anthology is a bunch of stories that have nothing to do with each other. It’s what happens when the ponies who write get together and create one giant work,” I explained. “That’s what this is. It may say ABC’s on the front, but its really twenty-six stories of the wasteland.”

“Are there heroes in it?” The filly chirped. I smiled softly.

“Some. Sometimes there are villains too. It depends on the story.” I said. “Do you want to read it together?”

“Sure, that sounds fun!” The filly replied jumping up and down in place. I motioned for her to follow me. We made our way to the sitting circle where I sat the book down to begin reading.

“Alright then,” I said, opening the book to the first chapter. “Just sit down and we’ll begin.”

Apathy

By Stonershy

If we had just kept moving, I would have never gotten us into this mess. How much further could it have been to the next town? We would have made it with no trouble. All we had to do was keep walking, and everything would have been fine.

All I can do now is ask myself, *how did it even happen?*

That day started out like any other day. Things needed fixing, and I was the pony to fix them. Word of mouth pointed me to the bar in the middle of town, and after a little chat with the owner—I forget his name—I got to work.

While I was finishing up, I remember saying something like, “Who’d you have workin’ on this before me?”

Then he said, “Couple folks, to tell the truth. None of ‘em could figure it out, and the ones that did only got it to work for a few days before it would break down again.”

“Well it looks to me like somepony tried to half-ass a patch-up, and then somepony else tried to half-ass another patch-up on top of that.” I thumped the thing a few times with my hoof. “And anyone else that took a crack at this just banged on it with a wrench.”

The owner laughed. “Yeah, I figured as much. Anyway, the caps are yours, and I’ll give you a drink on the house if you like.”

That sounded good to me. I picked up my tools and followed him out to the bar. He turned his radio down, then swept his hoof toward the grubby-looking bottles on the back shelf, and I pointed to the gin.

“You plan on settling here? Goddess knows this town could use a pony that knows how to keep things up and running.”

I shook my head as the owner poured me a shot, then I took it between my hooves and knocked it back. It was good stuff, and I appreciated that.

“The wife wants to keep moving. I guess she thinks she’ll have better luck selling things if she’s got more competition.” I slid the glass back to him. “Besides, if I set up shop here, I’m gonna run out of things to fix pretty fast.”

He smiled and shrugged, then he said, “Usually it’s unicorns that know their way around maintenance, but I guess they don’t wander through here if they can avoid it.” I think he chuckled a little after that.

“Can’t say I blame ‘em,” I told him. I didn’t have a horn. That meant I wasn’t anything too special around types like him. But I *was* sitting in *his* bar, so just to be safe, I added, “Caps are caps, though. You do what you gotta do.”

He nodded a little, scooping up a rag and wiping down the counter. “Where are you headed, then?”

The gin’s aftertaste was fading fast. “Out to the coast. Manehattan.” I ran my tongue over my teeth. “Maybe Fillydelphia.”

That got his attention. “Me and my boys are from Fillydelphia.” He stopped polishing and looked me in the eyes. “If you end up in Filly, you oughta see about working for Red Eye proper.”

“Mind if I give you as a reference?” I asked, smirking.

“Oh yeah, sure, just put me on your resume.” After we got the laughs out of our system, he smiled and waved a hoof toward the door. “No joke, though. You put in the hard work; Red Eye will pay you fair.” He pointed that same hoof toward my chest. “Especially a pony that can fix things.”

I was about to say something when I heard shouting outside. There were already several ponies barging in by the time I had turned to look. At first glance, you might mistake them for raiders with the way they were dressed, but a slaver is just a tamed raider, really.

“We caught one of ‘em!” They shouted over one another. “He ain’t told us where the rest are yet!”

There was a colt with them that stuck right out, mostly because he had been battered until he couldn’t open his eyes. He was screaming too, but his were pleas for help. I realized a moment later that they were dragging him, and that was because his hind legs had been broken.

I got to my hooves, but the owner put his rag down. I remember him giving me this casual little nod as he turned the radio up again, flooding the room with music. “Sorry for the racket. I’ve gotta deal with this.” He trotted around the bar to join them, calling back with, “Thanks again for the help.”

At first, all I could think was, *he can’t be more than a year older than my son.*

As they held the colt down, I took the bag of caps off the counter, where he had left them for me. Then I looked down at my tools.

The memories started flooding my mind, drowning out everything else. There were five of them, plus the bartender; they all had their backs turned, focusing on the screaming, squirming colt. I asked myself, *how fast could I club one of them to death? How quickly would they draw their weapons? How long would it take help to arrive?*

Maybe if I were younger, I told myself, turning toward the door. *Maybe if I didn’t have a wife and foal to take care of.*

I could still hear the screams over the music when I closed the door behind me, but the farther I walked, the easier they were to ignore.

My son—Slate—was playing with other colts and fillies a few buildings down, all of them squawking and laughing. He grinned and waved when he noticed me, but he kept on playing. Looking at Slate made me think back to what I had just walked away from at the bar, but I knew it would pass soon enough.

My wife—Lien—had put together a little stand out in front of the inn. She didn't look too thrilled that nopony seemed interested, but seeing me raised her spirits. We shared a kiss behind the makeshift counter. That made me feel at least a little better, but she could probably tell that my smile wasn't honest.

Lien also probably noticed the way my eyes were lingering on our son.

"Something happen?" she asked, cocking an ear like she always does.

"Nah." I shook my head. "Just an old generator. Guy paid me pretty decent, too."

"Well that's good. At least one of us made some caps today."

It got a little easier to smile. "Business was slow again, huh?"

"Slow? Try dead." She sighed and gave her stand a little kick with a hind leg. "Haven't sold a damn thing since we arrived."

"I get the feeling you don't like it here."

"Not particularly," she droned, frowning her brow.

"Me neither." I looked to the horizon, then back to my wife. "Wanna get a move on, then? Next town isn't too far over. We've got a few hours of daylight left, probably make it by sundown."

Lien scrunched her lips to one side, but before she could say anything, something else got her attention. When I realized she was looking past me, I turned around to see what it was.

The owner of the bar, and the ponies that had barged into the bar, were making their way down the street. I felt a knot in my stomach when I noticed that the beaten colt wasn't with them. He grinned and waved to me, and I did the same, but hoped he wouldn't stop and start chattering. My hopes were dashed pretty much instantly.

"Sorry you had to see that back there. We've been having some trouble with a group of ponies that think they have the right to attack our shipments and free our slaves, and, well, that boy you saw was one of 'em." Then the owner chuckled. "Told us where to find the rest, too. My boys are on their way to go deal with 'em."

I looked over at Lien in time to catch her frowning. "Ain't none of my business," I told him. She glanced up at me and I gave her a little nudge. "You do what you gotta do. Me and mine are thinking of heading out, though, especially if things might get hectic soon."

The owner nodded, then perked his ears. "Shoot, if you're gonna hit the trail, it's only right that my boys see you off. You'll both be headed in the same direction." The grizzled stallions around him gave him an almost confused look.

It was Lien's turn to nudge me. I turned to note the disapproval on her face, then turned back to the owner and shook my head. "That won't be necessary. We've got a foal, and we'll just slow them

down.”

“Don’t you worry about that, now. Ain’t no rush to get out there.” He looked to the horizon, then back to me. “My boys will keep you and your family safe ‘till it’s time to part ways. You have my word.”

“Well, that’s mighty kind of you,” I told him, doing my best to look pleased. Slate galloped to my side, peering up at me with a curious look on his face. “If your boys don’t mind waiting a bit so that we can pack up, I’d like to take you up on that offer.”

He nodded, and the group of them continued on their way down the street.

As I knelt behind the stand, I heard him say, “That is a good pony there, boys. He did a fine job fixing up our generator, and he’s been helping folks around town, too. It’s only right to keep him safe and make sure other folks can benefit from his talents.”

Just before he slipped out of earshot, I heard him add, “Might even end up back home in Filly! Goddess knows Red Eye could use the help.”

Lien fixed a sharp, stern gaze on me. “I don’t like it.”

My eyes avoided hers the best they could. “I—”

“What if this is a trap?” She quietly but firmly struck the ground with her hoof. “What if they turn on us while we’re out in the middle of nowhere?”

I shrugged. “He seems decent enough.”

She bared her teeth and pressed her nose to mine. “He’s a *slave trader* for *Red Eye*.”

“But he gave us his word,” I calmly told her, leaning back, “and on top of that, he thinks we’re headed to Filly.”

“And what is that about, while we’re at it? I thought we were heading to Manehattan.”

“What’s *Filly*?” Slate asked, poking his nose between us.

“Fillydelphia is a terrible, awful place, Slate.” She looked me dead in the eyes, frowning. “We are definitely *not* going there.”

I gave up on holding eye contact and focused on packing her merchandise. She begrudgingly followed my example a moment later.

“I just told him what I thought he wanted to hear. And hey, it looks like that got us an escort.”

“You didn’t answer my question, though,” Lien said, still frowning. “What if they—”

I interrupted her very simply, but very quietly. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that... and if it does, I’ll be ready.”

“What happened at the bar?” she asked as she looked up the street, her gaze becoming distant.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Without saying anything further, I stood and looked down at Slate. I remember that I wasn’t haunted by the colt from the bar anymore when he smiled up at me.

“Let’s go pack up your things, kiddo.”

There wasn’t much to pack, honestly, but Slate raced on ahead of me, letting the door to the inn bang shut behind him. He was already slipping his toys into his saddlebag when I pushed my way into our room.

“So what happens in Fillydelphia that makes it awful?” he asked, with innocence that only a child is capable of.

“That’s where Red Eye is set up, and your mama doesn’t like that he uses slaves to get things done.”

He looked up at me and tilted his head. “Do you?”

I think I sighed right about then, and then I sat down on the bed. “No. But it’s not really my place to say what’s right or not. He’s... he might just make a difference in the wasteland, in time. I just hope it’s for the best.”

Slate had already finished packing. He climbed onto the bed and sat next to me. “And what if it’s not?”

“Well, then I guess somepony is gonna have to do something about it.” I lifted a hoof to the back of his neck. Stroking his mane made me feel more comfortable talking about it. “I just hope that, whoever takes over after that don’t end up even worse than the pony they’re replacing.”

Lien trotted in right after that. She still looked a little bent out of shape about our travel plans, but I guess she had accepted it by that point. A few more minutes of packing, and we were on our way out the door, and making our way toward the edge of town. The bar owner and his sons were waiting for us by the front gate.

Before saying anything, he smiled and gave me a deep nod. “Thank you again for your help around here. Now, my boys are gonna have to break off a little more than halfway to the next town to deal with our little problem, but this is all Red Eye controlled territory. I don’t think you’ll run into trouble.”

I nodded, and we stepped toward the gate. It slowly rattled open, and my family and his family stepped out into the wasteland.

“And don’t forget,” the owner called to me over the gate, “you’re always welcome if you’re ever in the area!”

The journey was a mostly quiet one. I could hear the owner’s sons up ahead of us, going over their strategy for the assault to come. Slate and Lien stayed close, but only Lien seemed uncomfortable.

Eventually, Slate asked, “So how come these ponies have been messing with your town?”

“Slate,” Lien scolded, looking more afraid than anything. “That’s not a proper thing to ask.”

One of the owner’s sons just chuckled. “It’s alright, ma’am.” He looked back at us and shrugged. “We reckon they feel like they have a right to attack us. Ain’t too fond of the fact that we’re a slave tradin’ town.” He snorted softly. “But just ‘cause they feel like they’re doin’ the right thing, that *don’t* make ‘em right. They been hurtin’ folks around town that don’t got nothin’ to do with any of it. They *killed* one of our brothers just last week.”

Another quipped, “Guess now we’re even, huh?”

The first brother spat, then continued. “Anyway, we been through the motions. Reasonin’, bargainin’, all that. Ain’t nothin’ left to do now but do things their way and put an end to it.”

It got quiet again after that. I kept my eye on the stallions in front of us, but every now and then, I let my eyes wander. The terrain was pretty rocky, almost mountainous, and while the path generally stayed on the high ground, there were plenty of canyons. It was getting dark when they started to slow down.

One of them looked back at me and nodded. “You folks go on ahead. I know pa already thanked you to Canterlot and back, but, well, thanks.”

There was a faint glow just over the next hill. They started creeping toward it, drawing their weapons as they went. Lien shook her head, and gently pushed Slate onward. I followed.

We had only made it a few paces before the shooting started.

Slate froze in his tracks, and Lien looked back, eyes wide. Mares and stallions shouted frantically, and were just as quickly cut short. I was standing behind them, and I remember having to force myself to keep my eyes forward.

I waited for their shock to wear off before taking another step. There were a few more pops of gunfire, but the screaming and crying kept right on going.

There was a filly somewhere in that mess.

Slate looked back again, then looked to me. I shook my head and kept walking.

“You said you don’t like it, either, papa.”

I stopped. “I said it wasn’t any of my business.”

“But what if Red Eyes wrong? If you think what he’s doing is bad, then how can you think it’ll turn out good?”

I turned around. “It’s more complicated than that, Slate.”

“No it’s not!” He stomped and furrowed his brow. “If you don’t like it, then you should do something to stop it before it gets worse!”

And *that's* when I made the mistake. I started giving it *thought*. We were out in the middle of the wasteland. No one had followed us.

It was just *us*, and **them**.

"Measure." Lien looked at me, then at the glow behind the hill. She frowned and shook her head. "*Don't.*"

But she knew I had already made up my mind. "Stay here," I told her.

And then I stepped off the beaten path, and made my way toward that hill. I had a revolver strapped to my chest, but I considered that a last resort. All the tools I'd need were right in my saddle bags.

I peered over the ridge, and saw what was left of the camp. They had clearly been there a while. Leantos made out of salvaged metal, with an actual hut or two, fire pits crackling. Its surviving inhabitants had all been dragged around to the far side of the camp. A few were clearly unharmed, but others had been crippled by their injuries, squirming and bleeding on the ground.

Their numbers were a little startling. I had only expected five or six, and there were closer to fifteen or twenty.

It was then I realized that the owner's sons hadn't gone there to wipe them out. A few of these ponies had died in the crossfire, maybe, but for the most part they would be fine with a little patching up. These ponies had a wagon on site, and now, the survivors were being forced onto it, one by one. There were a few younger ponies actually standing in the wagon, held there at gunpoint. They were the ones doing most of the wailing.

Five ponies with guns, three of which were distracted with loading the wounded into a wagon and keeping them there, and the other two standing guard.

Slinking up to the camp was no trouble. The fire cast plenty of shadows, and once I had found a hiding spot, it was just a matter of waiting for one of the brothers to come into range. As I waited, I remember feeling how heavy my wrench was. It hadn't seemed that heavy back at the bar.

One of the brothers stepped past me and paused. I reared up, wrench between my hooves, and he looked me right in the eyes. I feel like, for a split second, he recognized me.

Experience told me that the sound wouldn't carry. I brought the wrench down, right between his ears. He crumpled into a heap, and I dragged him into the shadows with me. He was twitching, trying to reach out. I clubbed him with the wrench until he wasn't recognizable anymore, until he stopped moving, and then I moved on.

The next brother called out to the other side of the camp. I dropped to the ground, my neighbor a corpse, and waited. He passed, but not closely enough for me to take him down. I got up very slowly and followed.

They were beginning to realize that something wasn't right, but I had expected that.

When the pony I was tailing was well enough away from the rest, I made my move. I cracked him

across the back of his skull, but he stayed standing, staggering a few more steps. I hit him again, and he tumbled forward, whimpering something. I could feel his blood cling to my face as I finished him off, and it made my stomach turn.

There were only three brothers left, and they were starting to panic.

Sneaking around could only do so much good for me while they were grouped close together; I needed to scatter them. The brother I had just killed had been carrying a sub-machine gun. I got as low to the ground as I could, pointed it skyward, and gave the trigger a squeeze. Frenzied hoof-beats and shouting told me that I had gotten the desired effect. They tried calling out to him again, and when they didn't hear a response, they started spraying at shadows.

While they were still gripped with paranoia and wasting ammunition, I made my way around the edge of the camp, staying low and behind cover.

They had switched over from cries of concern to guttural threats, and probably figured that one of the survivors had been hiding, waiting for a chance to fight back. I found a new spot and watched. Of the three that were left, two were slowly advancing, weapons reloaded and ready. The third—which I could now see had taken a bullet to the flank—stayed by the wagon, keeping a gun on their captives. He was my next target.

None of the ponies in the wagon raised any kind of alarm as I crept up on him. They knew to keep quiet, but that didn't stop them from observing, silently acknowledging me.

Bludgeoning him seemed too risky with a trigger between his teeth, so I switched to a screwdriver. I had lined up to stab him through the spine, but as I was coming out of the shadows, he turned with eyes wide. Maybe he had noticed his captives had their eyes on something. With his neck twisted, I went through his windpipe instead, drawing a muffled gurgle out of him.

A few rounds streaked by my face before I could knock his gun away. He staggered back, his wounded leg failing, and I wrenched the screwdriver out of his neck. It took three solid jabs though the eye socket for him to go still. I remember how horribly sticky the screwdriver felt as I pulled it free.

The ponies he had been guarding wasted no time in making their escape, but I wasn't finished yet.

My revolver was out and I was behind a rock before the other two could get a clean shot. I dropped one of them as he stumbled toward the wagon, firing wildly as he went down, but the last of the five brothers forced me back into cover.

He had me outgunned, and I could hear him coming closer, swearing furiously over the clamor of suppressing fire. Their operation was a bust, and at that point, I figured all he wanted to do was mutilate me in retaliation. Can't say I blamed him.

"I hate to do this to you," I said, loud enough for him to hear.

Even though he had gotten a look at me, I don't think he had realized who I was until I started talking.

I could hear him sputtering, and then finally, he roared, "Did *you* do this you motherfucker?!"

All I could think to say was, “I did.”

And all I figure he could think to say to that was, “*Why?* What the fuck did we ever do to *you?!?*”

He was real close at that point. I had my doubts about whether or not I was a faster shot.

“What did you do back to that colt at the bar? What was gonna happen to the foals you rounded up here?” I held the handle of my revolver up to my mouth. “Caps are caps, but you gotta draw the line somewhere.”

His hoofbeats slowed just on the other side of the rock I was using as cover. I clenched the handle between my teeth, and ran my tongue over the trigger.

“Yeah? Well you stepped over the line when you crossed us, and now—”

There was a short burst of sub-machinegun fire. He stumbled forward and sprawled out onto his side, arching his back and screaming. I heard a gun clatter to the ground behind him.

“Let’s go,” Lien muttered.

She stood over the body of the last surviving brother as he writhed in agony. His back had been pockmarked, trickling out bright, fresh blood. He looked up at me, and I couldn’t tell if he was pleading or cursing my existence. I shook my head, leveled my revolver, and fired. When I raised my head, my heart stopped.

Slate’s was standing just a few paces behind his mother, staring at me like I was a hellhound.

I wiped the blood off my face and stepped away from the carnage.

And that was the end of it. Almost.

“Thank you,” I heard somepony say.

I turned to see a filly behind me. Others were slowly coming back to the camp, those that were able now tending to the wounded. She smiled up at me, trembling, but sincere.

I looked her dead in the eyes. “*Don’t.*”

Her smile vanished, replaced with shock. “But you saved us. You’re a hero!”

“No!” She flinched as I stomped. Ponies nearby froze, fixing their eyes on me. “I am *not* a fucking *hero!*”

I had their attention now, looking across the faces of the ponies I had saved.

“All of you listen to me, and listen *good*. If I hear about what happened here, and I don’t care where I hear it from, I will hunt each one of you down and fucking **kill** you! ***Do you understand me?!?***”

Some nodded, all were silent. I turned away, leaving just as quietly as I had arrived.

“We don’t talk about this,” I told Slate as we walked into the night. “Ever.”

Lien added, “What your papa did may have been the right thing, but we’re not proud of what we had to do.”

I nodded in agreement. “Tonight never happened.”

And all Slate whimpered was, “*Okay.*”

That was two nights ago now. We only stayed the night in the next town over, and spent the rest of the following day traveling, trying to put as much distance as possible between us and what I had done. There was no mention of it, word of mouth or otherwise, until this afternoon.

I was fixing up some giraffe’s auto-doc when I heard it. She had her radio on, tuned to one of the few broadcasts that’s not stuck on repeat. The music faded out, and the DJ started talking, like always.

“Hey folks, DJ Pone Three here... like you needed me to tell you that! So didja hear the one about the repair-pony that had a change of heart?”

My breath caught in my throat.

“Way out in the badlands, this guy was traveling with a band of Red Eye’s cronies, and when they split to round up some fresh slaves, he took them down all by himself. Didn’t even ask for a reward!”

I had stopped moving entirely, staring at the radio in disbelief.

“I know doing the right thing can be hard, but sometimes you’ve just gotta do it yourself to give other ponies the right idea. If you’re listening out there, keep up the good work!”

My heart raced in my chest. At first, all I could do was dwell on my memory of the bar. The bar owner had his radio turned to the same frequency when I had been there. I thought back to his sons barging in, dragging a foal with them, only this time it was Slate that they had beaten near senseless.

Cringing, I tried to reason with myself.

What’s the chance that he had heard the broadcast? I asked myself. But I hadn’t exactly been discreet during my stay, and our departure was hardly candid. Paranoia hijacked my train of thought. *Even if he doesn’t figure it out himself... it won’t take a genius to put two and two together.*

There was no arguing with that. I knew it would only be a matter of time until someone figured out who I was and what I had done.

Right on cue, I realized that the giraffe was giving me a curious sort of look, and then she started to smile.

“It wasn’t me,” I growled. “Ain’t no business of mine to mess with slave traders. Caps are caps.”

Her smile faded, and I finished my work so fast that I almost forgot to collect my pay.

The walk back to the inn was spent puzzling over what to do, or if anything even needed to be done. If anything *could* be done.

I doubted that Red Eye would be getting involved. Were that the case, he would have already sent reinforcements or an alicorn long before my arrival.

In the broadcast, I was not given a physical description beyond *repair-pony*, which ruled out trouble from Red Eye sympathizers. There had also been no mention of my family, which I was immensely grateful for. But, the bar owner knew who I was, and he knew I had a wife and son.

There was no doubt in my mind that I had made things personal.

I figured he wouldn’t come for me himself. He was easily twice my age. What he lacked in youth, however, he made up for in wealth. It had been readily apparent to me that, even though he lacked a title like *mayor* or *sheriff*, it was his town we were passing through. Assassins and mercenaries were in no short supply, and that meant they were inexpensive as well.

I tried my best to hide my worries as the inn came into sight.

Lien had put together another stand outside, smiling as she haggled with a customer. She glanced up and gave me a little wave, then went right back to it. I decided not to spoil her mood with what I had heard on the radio. There would be time enough for that later.

Slate sat by the doorway, watching other foals play in the street. He put on a half-hearted smile when he saw me.

“Papa?” he said at barely above a whisper. “I know you said we wouldn’t talk about it, but... I still think what you did was right, even if it was scarier than I thought it would be.”

“It should never stop being scary,” I told him. “The fact that it did scare you means that you’re a good pony.”

Hearing that seemed to relieve him. He smiled, and I kissed him on the forehead.

I didn’t find the courage to have that talk with Lien until hours later, after Slate had nodded off for the night. We were on the bed; Lien had her nose in a book, and I was tired of pretending to sleep.

There was no reason to beat around the bush. I rolled over and told her, plain and simple: “I heard something on the radio today.”

“I heard something too,” she said, looking up from her book. “Not on the radio, though. Chit-chatting with customers.”

Without realizing it, I had asked for confirmation. She just nodded, sighing.

“What are we going to do?”

She shut her book and turned her eyes on me without turning her head. “We need to leave. Not too suddenly, but first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Where will we go?”

“I have family in Manehattan.” She nodded again, more to herself than anything. “We should be safe staying at Tenpony.”

“I’m sorry,” was all I could think to whisper.

“Me too.” She set her book aside and turned away from me. “But we can’t take it back.” After several moments of silence on my end, she added, “Try to forget about it and get some sleep, okay?”

I remained silent as I slipped off the bed and crossed to the far side of the room. Somewhere in the back of my mind, the urge to run had taken hold. I can still feel it there, telling me to leave, but that’s taking too big a risk. Even if I were to split off from my family, I have no guarantee that Slate and Lien would be safe.

And that brings me to now. My only real option.

Sitting here, with my eyes on the door.

Watching.

Waiting.

Beep

By RevelRomp

Beep.

The mare's hooves stopped on the spot and her eyes dove for the ground.

Beep.

Her pin-point violet eyes locked onto a thick metal disc on the ground just off to her side. The hoof-sized orange button and flashing light on top contrasted the dull, dirty outer shell of the disc. The mare's foreleg swung with a whistle and slapped the disc clear across the dirty landscape and right into the door of an old wooden building on its last legs.

Beep.

The mare tossed herself into a roll, coming to a low rest behind a cold dumpster that reeked of two-hundred years ruined garbage and whatever else Wastelanders thought was wise to toss into an otherwise abandoned trash pile. She let out a small yelp, a chunk of her mane ripped free by a few stray pieces of rebar jutting out from the pile, resulting in a clumpy mess of brown, red, and pink adorning the rebar like a miniature pike.

Boom!

Wooden boards, shredded paper, and sharp metal fragments blasted into the air like a particularly abrasive substitute for confetti and fireworks. Her heart pounded, and a feeling of warmth ran from her head to her hooves. A smirk wormed its way onto the mare's face as she pushed herself upright again.

A whistle pierced the air. The mare stole a skyward glance.

Plink. Beep.

It was raining metal discs.

Beep. Beep. Plink. Ka-Plink. Be-Be-Be...

It was raining **lots** of metal discs. Her smirk melted.

Boom!

The mare stared upwards, frozen in place. The mere second that her eyes were fixed on the sky was more than enough time for the first metal disc to hit the ground in front of her. It exploded, sending her sailing through the air and peppering her flank with shrapnel. Her bread and butter cutie mark was ripped to shreds as she hit the ground. She spiraled across broken asphalt, coming to a stop half on her hooves.

Ka-Plink. Beep.

She batted at the metal disc that had fallen in front of her face, shrieking wildly as it went bouncing away. The mare pushed herself to her hooves, scrambling to race away from the rain of death. She gritted her teeth, pain racing up and down her back leg. She limped forward, her pace heavy and weak, but a pace nonetheless. She had to get away from this place. *Anywhere but here!!* She thought as she moved on.

The mare zigged and zagged from building to building, the plinking sounds of falling metal discs meeting her ears. Every building she approached resulted in more beeping and explosions, resulting in a chain reaction that set each structure ablaze. Anything that had been worth scavenging inside them was certainly gone.

...

Elsewhere, along a dilapidated stretch of road, a lone sprite bot bobbed in place. Below the floating robot lay a campsite. Strewn about the camp like pony soup was the decaying body of a mare, complete with green pepper fluff, pink and brown meaty bits, white bone crackers, and topped with a heaping helping of sanguine broth. Next to the soup lay a patched together leather saddlebag, a strange compliment to the macabre dish.

Next to the bag lay a bundle of chems, up to and including several syringes of Med-X and a grouping of healing potions. Beyond that, a brahmin corpse that was rotting away, and a gatling gun. The perforated packs attached to the brahmin's sides were spilling out with their goodies, from spiced Rabbit jerky to a saucy prewar magazine called "Hinds". Several weapons and ammunition also rested alongside the dead brahmin.

The sprite bot played no music. It did not drift aimlessly. It bobbed in that one spot, surveying the spectacle like a pensive pony. A loud screeching sound followed by a series of explosions broke the still air. Starting softly, the sounds quickly grew louder into a raucous cacophony. The sprite bot hovered impassively, turning about just in time to see a goldenrod and fuschia mare come tumbling down the road. She flopped face first into a syringe of Med-X, a relieved sigh echoing from her lips. Grabbing onto the healing potions, the mare downed them all at once and stood quickly, her still-burning tail becoming entangled with the leather bag. Just as quickly as she had appeared, the mare charged forward, letting rip a loud string of expletives as she wrapped her forehooves around the Gatling Gun's

limber and pushed away.

Klunk-KaPlink.

A large metal disc landed on the sprite bot, knocking it to the ground.

“Beep,” greeted the mine.

“Beep,” answered the sprite bot.

BOOM went the campsite.

...

The mare hooted loudly as she ran, not because of the pain - despite the fact that the Med-X cleared that right up - but because it was fun! The way her throat rumbled when the detonation of the mines and the blasts of gunfire weren't drowning things out made her feel exhilarated. The gunfire was of course, her own.

Common sense and basic logic says that shooting at mines is a dangerous occupation and one probably better left to those that are crazy. The mare chuckled with glee at that. There was no time for that sort of thinking! As she pushed away to try and put some distance between herself and the seemingly endless torrent of explosions, she gave the occasional tug at the crank-trigger on the gatling gun and fired wild volleys into the air behind her.

Her destination rolled into view. Two bucks stood guard in front of the wooden entry door, both armed with pistols and spears. The first buck- a pegasus- was clad in a mashup of bloodied and muddied mid-war garments and a variety of pointy metal bits. The second wore the tattered remains of a firemare's uniform, a mask with a tear to let his horn through, a dog's collar, and a bunch of clipboards.

A sign on the building behind them bore a faded and singed graphic of two giggling fillies draped across each other with soda bottles pressed between their forehooves and fruit-filled bubbles stippling the background. Above the graphic in cursive script were the words "The Pop Stop". Graffiti scrawled in the empty space depicted exaggerated versions of the two ponies with gigantic rumps enjoying what was certainly not-pop. Skulls and broken bones were pasted against the sign in a six-point star.

When the rolling harbinger of bulletholes and explosions drew near, the two bucks gave each other a brief glance before raising their weapons.

The unicorn waved a foreleg and gun, greeting the mare with a shouted string of expletives.

The pegasus was no more kind in his words, demanding to know what happened to Butter Churn. To

drive home his point, he gave a warning shot with his pistol. The bullet ricocheted on the frame of the gatling gun and pierced right between the clipboards into the unicorn partner's foreleg. He fell, letting loose a further string of expletives that would make even the most foul-mouthed sailors cringe. The mare didn't care, ramming the gatling gun right through the door!

Spla-Plink.

A metal disc slammed against the pegasus's head. He flung it with a wing at the other guard. The pitch hit clipboards, knocking them hard against the bullet wound.

Beep.

There was a brief, one-sided game of hot-potato with the landmine between the downed and bleeding buck and the buck with wings. It only lasted one round of exchange before the pegasus kicked the unicorn onto his back, spread his wings, and flew up out of the blast range.

Thunk.

The pegasus squawked, ramming face first into a shower of metal. He collapsed back to the ground in a heap, wishing only briefly that he had taken that firemare's helmet.

Beep.

The doors slammed open from the other side, knocking both the greeters and their newly amassed collection of mines about. Unpleasant looking ponies poured out through the door, shooting wild to stir up the mood. Only one newcomer- a heavily scarred griffon cub- spied the blinking mines. He flew back into the building, abandoning the rowdy mob.

Boom.

The mare dropped the gatling gun to the ground with a clatter and shoved her way past the bar. She flew up the stairs like a bat out of Tartarus, making a beeline for a room. She kicked open the door, which bore the name "Breadcrumbs" in graffiti, and slammed the door shut. She then realized that this was an utterly horrible idea.

Bzzt. Boop. Bzzt.

A robot bumped into the mare's forehead. It looked like a sprite bot, but thinner and desaturated. The white silhouette of a rearing stallion alicorn took the spot where there would typically be Robronco and ministry brandings. Fine print beneath read "*On the Go Delivery Drone Release Candidate*" followed by smaller alphanumeric nonsense. A metal portal on the bottom of the bot slide its doors open, and deposited a metal disc right on the nose of Breadcrumbs. Her eyes widened as her tail finished its slow

burn, leaving only ash.

Beep.

The mine activated, and the orange light on top began blinking.

Breadcrumbs shook the mine off then buried herself in a pile of mattresses, pillows, guns, magazines, and everything else within hoof's reach.

Beep

Collapse

By a friendly hobo

“Come on, ponies, let’s hustle!” a small, elderly pony yelled from on top of an APC down the road from me. The green stallion wore an old green beret on top of his white mane, and his mouth was hidden behind a large, well-groomed beard. “We haven’t got time to dawdle!”

Evacuation. Had it really come to that? We’d fought the zebras for years, and Luna had promised that we’d never have to evacuate. I guess she’d been wrong. The Zebras were at our doorstep, our brave home guard defending us to the last pony. I was sure they’d hold out; after all, we were winning on other fronts.

My name was Cotton Bud, I was there with the 101st Peacekeepers division. We were tasked with maintaining order in wartime and suppressing riots. We were stationed at a small town only one hundred kilometers from the front lines.

We were sent there to herd the local population onto airships to transport them further inland in case the unthinkable happened. Our colts were tough, but those Zebra were damn near fanatic. If they broke through then, I didn’t think the high-pressure water cannon I sat behind behind, on top of an APC, would do much to deter them.

Ponies of varying races and sizes marched single file, most in deadly silence. Some whispered sweet, comforting words to crying foals too young to understand. My heart went out to them, and I hoped they’d never have to see what lay to the East. They didn’t deserve it.

I let out a long sigh as I watched a large airship rise over the houses and slowly drift away, headed further inland. ‘Another group saved,’ I thought to myself.

My riot gear felt heavy on my shoulders, heavier than it should. My group and I had been sent to three towns already, all of which we successfully evacuated. We hadn’t slept a wink since deployment three days ago. Some of us snuk in twenty minute naps where we could, but it wasn’t substantial.

I felt like I was actually in the military. My brothers and father were out fighting, holding back the striped tide, and I would have been with them if it wasn’t for medical reasons. They didn’t let me in because my spine was misaligned. I couldn’t do most of the things an army pony could do, but I could sit on top of an armoured vehicle with a big water gun. That wasn’t very stressful for my back.

I heard the distinct sounds of hooves climbing up the back of my vehicle, I took a gander and saw my squad leader climbing up. He was a tall orange unicorn stallion wearing a blue uniform.

“Hey, Bud,” he said sounding exhausted. He sat down beside me and sighed. I could see the large bags under his eyes from three days of being awake. He was the only one of us who hadn’t taken a break.

“Sir,” I said with a small nod. I turned my attention to the three lines of ponies walking in file towards the evac zone. “How long are we gonna be here?”

Copper Ale stared at the small buildings surrounding us, not answering me at first. This town was small, but had a population of almost five hundred. The tallest building was only five stories, but from between the cottages ahead of us we could see the massive tower of Hayseed, one of the smaller cities of Equestria. I spotted at least five airships steadily floating away from it. Too much of a risk not to evacuate I suppose.

“About twenty minutes,” Copper finally replied. “Three airships away, holding about seventy five each. How many does that leave?”

“Uh...” I said, going into thought. I was never any good at math. “Just over half,” I answered after about twenty seconds. “Two-seventy-five, I think.”

“Right,” the stallion said with a smile, giving me a pat on the back. He kind of reminded me of my old science teacher back when I was a foal. He’d always tutored me in math instead of my math teacher. She was mean.

The small stallion, the one who was yelling earlier, jumped off the APC nearby and held his hoof to his ear. After a few seconds, he grinned. “Good news everypony!” He yelled, “Our Southwestern battle groups, with the aid of the Coalition, have crossed into the Zebra Capitol region.”

There were gasps from the civilians, then a brief cheer. “We still gotta get outta here,” the old stallion said, calming everypony down. “We’re still under threat of the Zebs in the east. They’re gonna want to turn the tides soon. Keep it moving!”

Music to my ears. I smiled behind my tinted visor. That battlegroup was the one my family were deployed with. I was sure my ma and little brother were celebrating the news over in Manehattan. I couldn’t wait to see them again, hopefully soon. The end had to be soon, didn’t it? Surely the Zebras would surrender, seeing as our guys were so close.

I looked at Copper beside me, about to say something but the tears running down his cheeks were enough. He’d lost everything to the war, and to hear that we were on the verge of taking the enemy capitol? It must have been too much for him.

Two more airships flew rose above the buildings, each one loaded with ponies. That only left a few more on the ground, and I could see the end of the lines. Some of our colts in blue walked from building to building, making sure everyone had gotten out.

I looked up to the greying skies. Pegasi and Vertibucks zipped and zoomed far overhead, moving supplies and patrolling for griffin mercs. At least, I thought they were, but their patterns were a bit off. It looked like they were gathering clouds. Dark ones.

“That isn’t right...” I muttered to myself. “Why...”

Then I heard it. At first, it was a low drone from far away, but then more drones started to join it, until all I could hear was a heart stopping, stomach clenching wail of an air raid siren. More and more, from far and near, started to join in, blaring over the air.

Ponies began to scream and panic, not knowing what was going on. Even I didn’t know what was going on. I looked up to the south, not sure what I was looking for. Bombers? Dragons?

“No... oh sisters no...” Copper muttered, frozen still.

The old stallion on the ground didn’t pay any attention to the sirens, yelling at ponies to keep moving. Other ponies in blue riot armour and cop uniforms tried to keep everyone in line, but some got past, running to their homes to hide. All I could hear were the sirens, police ponies and Peace Keepers yelling, and civilians crying.

I didn’t know what to do. We all seemed so hopeful just ten seconds ago. The sirens from hell had banished all hope from these ponies. Those that didn’t run home, or run in the direction of the evacuation, broke down where they stood, holding their loved ones tight. The ponies in blue started to drag and carry them away, trying to get them out of there. I even spotted a mare holding a small foal and baby tight, crying into their manes and kissing them lovingly. They had no idea what was happening.

I looked at Copper, the one stallion who I could always talk to. The one who I trusted, and who I trusted like my own brothers. He was frozen solid, staring at the sky. Tears poured down his cheeks, dripping onto his riot vest. He was the only stallion who ever kept a cool head, no matter what, but his eyes said it all. They held no hope at all.

I looked up to the skies again, not sure what I was looking for. Then, an excruciatingly bright green light streaked over the horizon. Then another. Then another. Then I saw more streaks of bright colours flying from further inland, heading back in retaliation. “What is that?” I yelled.

“They did it...” Copper whispered. “They finally did it.” His cold, dead stare fell on me. “They’ve killed us all.”

“What?” I yelled over the sound of screams and shouts. “What do you mean?”

Before the stallion could reply, the sky lit up in a brilliant green. I looked west and saw a horrendous, enormous, demonic green-and-black cloud rising into the sky, like a mushroom made of pure horror. Whatever those things were, one landed right on top of Base Celestia. Shock waves rolled over the plains, toppling trees and throwing dust storms into the air.

Foom! Another hit, this time further north. Another city gone. Wiped out. What was going on? What did Copper mean? What had had the zebras done?

A very old stallion with a ragged beard stood on top of a small, three-story building, his beard and mane flowing in the wind, his whole form silhouetted by bright green. “The end is here!” he yelled out over the crowds. “The apocalypse has come!”

I stared in awe. My heart felt like it was in a vice, and my stomach tied itself into a thousand knots. The old coot was right. It was the end.

APCs and some of our other vehicles began to move, heading away from the clouds and out of town. Another airship tried to take off, full of ponies, but I didn’t see any more trying to take off. Those pilots had to be crazy to stay, either crazy or big damn heroes.

With a jolt, my APC began to move, slowly at first but picking up speed. “Where are we going?” I shouted down at the driver.

“Anywhere but here!” the mare replied. Candy Cane. I didn’t know her very well, though I wanted to. But if this was it... well, too late.

A green light began to brighten up the clouds. It was getting brighter and brighter, a low roar starting to pierce through the blaring sirens. The ground began to shake, then a painfully bright, massive comet flew overhead, suddenly superheating the area. It felt like million-degree air scorched my lungs.

Candy Cane and Copper screamed, but their cries of anguish were cut short as a massive explosion shattered the ground beneath us. Behind us, vehicles flew off the road as a shockwave tore through the town. It didn’t matter how fast we went. The back wheels of our vehicle lifted suddenly and I fell down into the cabin. The APC tumbled end-over-end through the green, superheated air. I felt my blood boiling and my coat burning. I screamed, but my lungs felt like they were full of lava. My heart felt like it had become a lump of charcoal.

I heard a crack, and a pain like no other lanced through my skull. Then I felt nothing. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. Everything turned black.

Was I dead?

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Pain pierced the blackness. My lungs felt like they'd just jump-started as I took my first breath of air. The air tasted foul. It must have been what evil tasted like. I felt like someone had shoved a belt-sander down my throat and then dipped my whole body in a deep-fat fryer.

My eyelids practically creaked as I opened them. Despite the pain, I had to know what'd happened. How I was alive. What had hit us. I had so many questions that needed answers. My eyes felt shriveled and dry, like raisins. It was dark inside the cab of the wrecked APC. The only light shone through a hole above me.

The first thing I made out was the cracked glass of my visor. It hadn't shattered, but the bottom right corner had cracked off, leaving just a jagged corner. My vision adjusted and I saw the inside of my APC. The side storage panels had burst open, throwing the contents everywhere. Boxes of supplies, weapons, personal belongings, everything.

Something had even fallen on me, it felt. I lifted my burning forelegs and reached under whatever it was. With a lot more effort than I thought I had left, I lifted the offending object. It was one of the armoured walls itself. I shifted it off my hind legs, and as it fell, it let in a ghostly green light from outside.

"C-Copper?" I rasped, my voice sounding like I'd gargled nails. "Candy?"

I got no reply. I turned my head and looked into the armoured cab, but all I could see was a severely burnt mare. There was no way she had lived through that. Then again, how had I survived?

"Any...Anyone?" I croaked, laying on the ground. I got no reply. "Anyone?" I tried again. "P-Please... s-somepony..." But there was nothing. Just a ringing in my ears and the crackling of fire. "I gotta get up..." I muttered to myself. "I... I gotta... I gotta get up..."

I looked at my outstretched forelegs and saw to my horror that my coat and skin had burnt away where my uniform's sleeves had ripped. The pain was excruciating, and I could even see my muscles tense as I moved them. I even saw the veins, still pumping blood.

I tried to roll over, but my back exploded in pain. My already weak spine was done for. A lifetime of pain and hardships had finally come to that. It was broken, no doubt about it. I couldn't feel my back half. But I had to do something. I had to get help.

I reached up to the twisted hole in the side of the vehicle and tried to pull myself up. Every inch of me protested, shooting wracking pains all through my body, but I couldn't give up. I'd survived the end, capitalized, The End. I couldn't let that chance to to waste.

I tried again, pulling on the side of the vehicle. I finally pulled my head over the side, then my

shoulders, then my torso. My lower half dangled limply inside the APC, but finally I pulled myself out and fell to the scorched dirt outside.

I lifted a hoof over my eyes, shielding them from the light and hot winds blowing through the cracks in my visor. All I could hear was the crackling of fire, the howling of winds, and rubble falling to the ground.

Blinking several times, I lowered my hoof. We'd been knocked several meters off the road, stopped only by the iron supports of a small shopping center. The APC had crashed through one of the walls. Down the street I saw the green mushroom cloud, rising into the air. I could only see the base of it, it was that close.

I looked back at the APC. The damn thing had saved my life, but the others weren't so lucky. The windshield had blown right open, exposing Candy to the blast, and as for Copper... all that remained was a darkened shadow of him, where he'd been sitting on top of the APC.

I wanted to cry. To roll over and die right there. They were dead. My best friend and somepony who I'd liked. Was I the only survivor? Had every other pony died? No. They couldn't have. There had to be others like me.

One hoof after the other, I dragged myself free of the rubble and out of the supermarket. It took an extraordinary amount of effort, but I made it. I looked to the sky, hoping to see even a glimmer of hope.

The clouds reflected the bright green, and in parts looked charred black. I watched as one of the airships fall to the ground, engulfed in green flames. I must not have been out long.

But there was hope. Two other airships remained airborne. But where could they land? I looked through the buildings, trying to spot Hayseed. I saw it alright, it and the cloud just behind it.

The support cables for the tower flailed wildly around it, and soon the whole thing crumbled into pieces, falling to the ground. Several buildings around me had collapsed, and closer to the cloud, it looked like they'd been vaporized.

I couldn't see a single soul around me. I was alone. The airships wouldn't come back for me, and there were no rescue teams. Everyone was dead. I saw charred limbs and bodies in the street, shadows scorched into crumbling walls. Some looked to be running, some on the ground weeping.

My wounds started to tingle, the pain slowly dissipating. My lower half flared into pain. I almost cried out, but was too surprised. I could feel it again! It felt as if my spine was repairing itself! But how? It was impossible! Unless it was something to do with those meteors, or whatever they were.

After a good ten minutes of pain and tingles, I regained control of my hind hooves. I pulled myself

upright, and looked myself up and down. I wasn't missing anything except for my tail, which looked like it was burnt off.

I began walking. Where, I had no idea. Away from the cloud sounded like a good idea. What was I going to do? I couldn't do nothing, that was for sure. That meant that the first thing I had to do was find help. Some of the airships had survived. Maybe I could radio for help?

Where would I find a working radio though? Our command vehicle was toast; I could see the front half of it wedged into a cottage down the road, its antennae snapped and satellite dish torn in two. Maybe the evac zone's control tower had survived. It wasn't reinforced, but it was flanked by concrete buildings.

My hooves barely responded to my commands as I stumbled over the hot rubble, barely gaining purchase. The streets were littered with charred debris, most of it still burning with green flames. Sisters, it was so hot. It felt like I was on fire, but something was keeping me alive in that hell. It was helping me, and even healing me. At least, that was how it felt.

I kicked a small piece of rubble accidentally and winced in pain. My hooves were chipped and cracked, exposing the muscle underneath. With each step, pain flared up all over my body. Sometimes, my vision would blur from the pain and my heartbeat would blast in my ears. It meant I was alive though. I was beginning to think that was a bad thing.

The streets howled with wind, but I could still hear the screams of innocents echoing down the street. They weren't anything more than echoes though. There were more charred ponies and ghostly silhouettes as I got closer to the evacuation point. They were getting more frequent as I approached the town square. I found myself thanking the princesses that I couldn't make out the features on what was left of the ponies. If I could, I wouldn't have made it this far.

I turned one last corner and leaned against a wall for support. I felt lightheaded, and I quickly found myself face first on the charred concrete. I groaned in agony and sobbed. I wanted to die. I didn't want to survive any longer. I wanted to see my family. Why wouldn't the world just let me die? The pain was excruciating.

No tears fell from my eyes. My tear ducts had dried up. I lived though. Lived through the apocalypse. Why? There had to be a reason. My head pounded and my vision blurred with every fifth step, but I was alive. Out of every pony in that town, no, in that region, fate had chosen me to live. Was I going to throw it all away? As much as I wanted to, I couldn't.

Getting back to my hooves, I stumbled forward. The square was so close now, I could see the temporary radio tower. Thank goodness it hadn't fallen. Someone was smiling down on me, but for how long?

I climbed over the rubble, trying to avert my eyes from the smoldering corpses that littered the area. Some wore charred riot armour, while others were holding each other for comfort before they died that way. Ponies' belongings, most burnt to cinders, were piled up, waiting to be loaded onto the metal frame of a scorched airship.

I navigated the barricades, not as hard as I thought, since most were destroyed, then up the creaking, red-hot metal stairs of the radio hut. It took me so long, but at the top my hooves tingled, healing themselves. Not fully, but enough.

I pushed on the door, and the whole thing fell down. Inside lay three bodies, two of which seemed mostly intact. The last one was still standing at a window, its head seared down to the bone. If I could, I probably would have vomited. No pony deserved any of this. The Zebras were going to pay. Had they already? Had we done the same to them?

It didn't matter anymore. I stumbled into the room, then tripped on the remains of a chair and landed next to one of the bodies. I groaned in pain, but when my vision cleared I saw the face of a mare staring back at me. She blinked. A survivor.

"Hello..." I croaked. "Can...Can you hear me?"

The mare took a long, raspy breath and coughed a sick green phlegm on to the ground. "Yes..." she rasped. "I... I... I can't feel anything..."

I reached forward and touched her cheek. To my surprise, the skin cracked and flaked off, revealing her muscles underneath. "I'm here." I said, trying to reassure her. As ecstatic as I was I'd found another survivor, she didn't look like she was going to make it. "We need to... get help."

The mare coughed one more time. Her mane had fallen out in chunks, and her skin was cracking with each movement. "R-Radio..." she rasped. "But... I... I'm not..."

"Shh," I said, getting to my hooves. "Y-You're going to make it... you have my word."

"Your word..." she whispered. "I d-don't even know you."

"Cotton Bud." I said, trying to see if the machines were still online. "And you?" Talking to her was the only thing I could think of. She had to stay focused. She had to survive.

"C-Custard Tart." she replied. She couldn't move, even if she was trying. "Cotton Bud... t-that's a nice..." She went silent.

I turned and crouched down beside her. "Come on, don't... don't die on me... please..." I begged. I didn't want to be alone.

She coughed a few times, showing she was alive. "I... I can't..." she rasped, staring at my visor.

"You can." I replied. "If I pushed forward, so can you."

The mare gave an extremely weak smile, the whole side of her face cracking and flaking from it. "I wish I could..." she whispered. "Can... c-can you... lift your visor?" she asked.

I hadn't tried yet, so I didn't know what to say. Instead, I put my hooves on my visor and tried to tilt it up. It took several seconds, but my visor became unstuck, lifting over my face. It felt so weird, this evil air, finally hitting my face. Then I stared down at her.

"You..." Tart said. "You d-don't look so good..." She continued to smile though.

"Neither do y-you..." I said, giving a small smile.

She coughed a few times, trying to chuckle, but she couldn't manage it. Her eyes began to close. "At least..." she began. "At least I'm not... not going to..."

"Don't." I said, my heart starting to break. I had just met someone who gave me hope, a survivor. She couldn't die. "J-Just don't..."

Her eyes widened again, with great effort. "I d-didn't die alone..." she whispered. "I'm happy the last thing I will s-see is a friendly f-face..."

"Don't you d-dare," I said, gently caressing her face. "You're going to survive!"

"No..." she sighed, her eyes closing. "I'm... find others... h-help them..." she closed her eyes and let out one last sigh. "G-Good... goodb..."

"No, please..." Nothing I could say would bring her back. She died in my hooves.

I let go of her face and looked up. "What's the point..." I said, hoping for an answer. "Why do you give me hope and take it away!" No reply. Of course not. Then I looked at the console, and spotted one dimly lit green light, then static.

"This is C-shhhhhzzzhzhkkkkk Camp Chocodile, repeat this is Captain M-shhkkkkkkzkkz Chocodile, someone, anyone please, respo-shhhzzkkkkk." A voice crackled faintly over a headset, sitting on a chair.

I picked it up and fitted it onto my head. "This is..." I stopped to cough, spitting out a dark blue slime. That couldn't be good. "This is Keeper Cotton Bud... please... talk to me..."

“Holy shit! C-shhhhhzzzzzkkkk Bud, where a-zhhhh you?” the voice asked.

“I can’t hear you,” I replied. “G-Give me a second...” I didn’t know how to work this fancy radio, but I had to try and get a clear transmission. But then at what cost? What if I lost the connection altogether? It was a risk I had to take.

It wasn’t long before I found a small knob sticking out from the console. That had to be useful, even if it was just a volume knob. I placed my gnarled hoof on it and turned it. Static burst through the headset, losing whoever was on the other side.

“No!” I shouted. “No no no no, please no!” I turned it the other way. “Come on, where are you!” and again, trying to find someone. I’d lost them. “No!”

I kept turning the dial, calling into the microphone. Minutes passed, but they felt like hours. Every second that ticked past, my chances of help dropped.

“Zzzzzssshshshshhhkkkkk -an you hear me! Hello?” That was it! That was the guy!

“Hello!” I almost shouted into the headset. “Captain? Is that you?”

“Fuckin’ -A, we got him again!” This time he actually sounded clear. “Son, you’re the first survivor we’ve found. Where are you, Keeper? You don’t sound so good.”

“T-Trotsdale, s-sir.” I said, then coughed again. “I... I need help...”

“Damn... that’s out of the way...” the stallion replied.

I didn’t care how far I was. “S-Sir... what h-happened?” I asked, sitting down. My legs couldn’t take it much longer.

There was a long sigh. “Son, I don’t know how to tell you this. The Zebras did it. They bombed us with balefire. We don’t know how many cities they’ve hit. All we can see on the cams is fire.”

“Where are you?” I asked. They’d survived, they had to be somewhere safe. “C-Can I get a pick up?”

“Camp Chocodile,” the captain replied. “Bunker in the Great Dividing Range. We’re diverting any survivors over here.” There was a long pause. “Chances of pickup though... those are slim...”

“Please...” I rasped, holding my head in my hooves. “Please... I need help...”

“Son, this is the collapse of civilization as we know it.” the captain said, his voice cold. “Everyone

who's survived needs help.”

“Are there a-any Stables near me?” I asked in a futile attempt to get help.

“They're all sealed by now...” That wasn't what I wanted to hear. “There's maybe a couple of hundred ponies on the surface who are alive, *maybe*. We haven't found anyone other than the airships on the airwaves.”

“Can you send one to me?”

“I... I'll see...” the captain said, with a another sigh. “Are there any other survivors?”

“Ye-” I stopped myself short and looked at Custard Tart. Her skin was still flaking off, but her uniform remained largely intact. She looked so peaceful. “No.”

“That...” the captain started. “That doesn't help your chances, son...” There was some mumbling in the background, some of it sounding tense and heated.

I rested my head on the console. The only way I'd get out of there was if they'd help me. I peered out of the window, seeing more mushroom clouds in the distance. They must have hit every population center. More streaks crossed the sky, then more explosions thumped in the distance. How long was it going to last?

I couldn't watch. I turned my head and stared at the ground. All I could see was a pistol, discarded as the bombs fell. It didn't look too damaged. Maybe it still worked? I picked it up and looked it over.

“Maybe you can't save me...” I whispered into the microphone. “But maybe I can save myself.” Then I pulled the pistol receiver back and held it close.

“Son, don't do it.” the captain said, breaking from his other conversation. “We need everyone we can get. This might be the collapse of civilization, but we need everyone out there to build a new one, or at least try.”

“Why...” I whispered. “I d-don't feel like a pony anymore...” my voice felt like gravel in my throat, scratching with each word. “I feel... like a corpse...”

“Just... hold on, son. I'll see what I can do.” The mic went quiet as the soldier talked to someone else. I listened for a few seconds, staring down the barrel of the gun. It could be over so quickly. I could be with my family again. With Copper. Maybe even Candy and Custard. I would be free of the new hell. Just a little bit of pressure on the trigger...

“Cotton? Cotton, are you there son?” the captain asked, his voice loud in my ear and slightly excited.

“Hello? Please come in!”

“I... I’m here...” I whispered, still staring at the gun. “Captain... I know you can’t save me...” It was a harsh reality, but it was the truth. There was nothing he could realistically do. Unless, of course, he wanted to come out here himself and save a poor soul he’d never even met before.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” What? “I’ve contacted airship delta-zero-niner. The captain on board was hesitant, but when I said survivors, he turned his ass around.” There was a lot of rustling coming through the mic. “Stand by, Cotton. Hang in there.”

Rescue? The concept seemed so... out of place. Was there hope? I looked at Custard’s peaceful body. She gave me hope, but she was taken from me. Was hope even real anymore?

“Can you walk?” the captain asked, his voice stepping down a notch, lacking in the excitement he had before. “Tell me you aren’t fused to something.”

“I c-can walk...” I replied, putting the gun down. I wanted to pull the trigger, but I just couldn’t. As long as there was hope, I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. “I d-don’t think so...” I hadn’t tried to pull my armour off. Why would I have. My hardened vest did seem more snug than before though, and after a few seconds of pulling and tugging I knew why. “I... I’m fused to my armour, sir...” That also wasn’t good. Not good at all... “Oh sisters, I’m a freak...”

“Freak or no, you’re alive.” The voice seemed very calm now. “Cotton, I need you to head north. The airship can’t touch down in town, too much of a hot zone. The captain said he can put down three kilometers out of town. Can you make it that far?”

“I...” I looked up and to what I figured was north. There were lots of clouds that way, but they all seemed so far. Had to be miles away. It sounded like they were going to put down on highway thirty-seven, if my geography was right. I looked at the gun in my hoof. Bullet to the brain, or potential survival. Those were my options.

Seconds passed as I stared at the gun, weighing my options. If I left, I’d be in the dark until I reached that airship, if I reached the airship.

The captain did say balefire though, and I remember hearing that that stuff does weird shit to living things. There was a lot of forest between town and the landing zone. Maybe I’d need the bullets for the trip.

“Son?”

That was it. Decision time. Either I put a bullet in my head, or I get walking.

“Cotton, are you there?”

I stayed silent as I looked north again. “I’m on my way.” I said, then put down the headset. I heard the captain say something, but I couldn’t make it out. I crouched down next to Custard and sighed, saying my final goodbye. I didn’t even know her, but I felt I owed it to her.

Sliding the pistol into my armour, I stood up again, then headed out the door. It looked like hell outside, and my short journey didn’t look like it was going to be fun. But dammit all, what did I have to lose?

So I began walking. Collapse, or no, I was going to survive.

Derelict Bay

By Red Light

So, you want to hear about Derelict Bay huh? Imagine a place that was abandoned by the goddesses and left derelict to rot until the end of time. Few venture in and fewer still return. It lies on the toxic coasts of Fillydelphia. The water is radioactive sludge and the sand is sulfur to the flesh. Don't think water would be a reprieve either, to merely touch it would melt the skin off your flesh and then eat away at your muscle down to the bone and Celestia save you if it rains. The acidic rain is like bathing in hydrochloric acid with a cheese grater. It's a place with no resources or anything of value or if it did it disappeared a long time ago. The slavers do not use it either, they abandoned it just like Celestia and Luna. Ah but that is where one smart enough (or desperate enough) could make use of Derelict Bay.

I pulled myself under the wire fence. I didn't have any time, I heard them coming for me and they were closing in. The mud squished under and I almost felt myself sink. Narrow columns of light waived erratically in the night sky, their flashlights were closing in and I could hear their shoutings. The gate was too low and the mud wasn't deep enough. If they found me I knew they'd stomp my skull in or electrify the gate with me under it! My masters were cruel but I don't know what came over me. One moment I saw I had stabbed my potential rapist with a pair of scissors and saw his twitching body and pooling blood on the floor, now I was running for my life or how much was left. I held my breath and tried to raise my mental barriers but nothing prepares you for self-inflicted pain. I pushed myself under the end of the fence and I felt the metal wires cutting and pulling at my flesh and coat. I almost felt the warm red blood but the mud was so cold, so very cold. I screamed as the last piece of skin began ripped leaving a small bloody shred on the fence like a trophy. I saw the lights turn in my direction in the sky, my cry had alerted them to my whereabouts.

I had to keep going though. Derelict Row was off limits for the slavers but that wouldn't stop a griffon from taking to the sky and gunning me down or worse plucking me up and taking me back to be tortured to death. No, I needed to hide.

“This way!” One of my pursuers declared. I limped, the small tears on my back burned. “Get em' Hawkes!” I knew the name. My fears were correct, a griffon...

The rain dripped in places and I felt the hissing sting of its acidic contents. I forced myself into another gallop when I heard Hawkes call from above threatening to flay me alive.

I threw myself into a small pile of rubble and debris in the vain hope of evading him. In vain it was because he landed with a heavy *thud* seconds later. Dammit, so this is how I would end...

“You'll make a nice pelt by my fireplace place, pony! Hahaha!” Hawkes laughed and crept around the debris pile. “I can wait all day... hell I'll get some sandwiches and we can have a picnic.” He added as he skirted around my hiding place.

I remembered the rain. I decided to goad him. “Could we have vegetable sandwiches? I don't like meat.” I said. *Drip, drip, drip.*

“Hehe I was thinking more of horse meat on my sandwiches for today.” He said continuing to strafe around me. *Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip.*

“Say, Hawkes, how does it feel?” I asked with a hint of bravado I didn't think I possessed. *Drip, drip,*

drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip.

“How what feels?” He asked but he seemed to start to notice the rain. *Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip.*

“To be melted alive.” I said and just as I finished my sentence the sky cut loose and the deadly torrential deluge fell to the earth.

Immediately I heard Hawkes scream in burning agony. I imagined his skin melting away and falling to the ground in sickly strips and his wings melting to their frame, disabling him from flying. He screamed while he could and then it died into pained gurgles and then it was nothing, he was finished. Now all I heard was the toxic rainstorm. In the storm I could barely make out the huddled mass of flesh that was- err had been Hawkes. He looked like an expiring beast. His flesh was falling off his bones like loose succulent meat but the once-intense pain was still prevalent on his face. His face, now a patchy mix of skin and exposed skull, reflected agonizing pain.

I breathed a shallow sigh of relief. He was dead, the slavers were halted and unlikely to pursue me but now I was in one of the most treacherous places in Fillydelphia. It was until later I felt a burning sensation in my hooves. I stopped and looked at them and the damp sand has made them bloody and scabby. The acid rain was being absorbed by the sandy ground of Derelict Bay. I needed to get on to solid ground.

....

My blistered hooves seemed to simmer as I pulled myself onto a collapsed roof that was just low enough to climb on. I huffed and huffed after the excruciating three foot climb but with my hooves it felt like seven. I tore off my slave rags and tried my best to bandage my hooves but at the very least it could shield me a little from the acid sand.

The storm subsided and I was granted a view of Derelict Bay. It was grim and dark but somehow it had a haunting beauty to it. The tide had come in partially submerging several buildings and damp sand blanketed much of the ground. I looked back at the hellscape of Fillydelphia, the reddish smog to the sky was not as present in Derelict Bay in fact there was a fog coming in from the ocean. The ocean scent felt sickly yes but to a mare that had been smelling smelters and boiling metal for several years it might as well have been a meadow of flowers.

"I will be free." I told myself and for once I could see the means to be free. It wasn't going to be easy and I wasn't coming out without scars but perhaps I could find a raft, maybe row myself to Friendship City. One way or another, I was going to be free...

Everyday

By Tofu

Just another day in the Wasteland.

I fiddled awkwardly with the weapon held in my forehooves while I waited, fighting the impulse to start twirling it, lest I butcher everypony standing around me. It was a halberd I'd found on the corpse of a pony that had been wearing an ancient set of royal guard armor, which I'd likewise taken for myself. Before I'd found it, I'd had to make do with a combat knife tied tightly to a piece of bent and twisted rebar, so this had definitely been a step up in the quality department.

“What’s on your mind, Caltrop? You look worried.”

I turned to face a unicorn mare with a coat so bright green that just looking at her made my mouth pucker. She had a short, chestnut-brown mane that was mostly obscured by the black helmet seated upon her head, save for a few rogue curls that poked up by her forehead. Combat armor of the same color protected her chest, and a little white emblem had been painted on the breast—the pawprint of a griffon’s hindleg. The logo of the company of mercenaries she was employed with.

“Unno, Peridot,” I shrugged. “I gots a bad feelin’ ‘bout this, that’s all. My belly’s been doin’ backflips fer the past ten minutes.”

“Worried?” Peridot cocked her head to the side, her features softening in concern. “That’s not like you. You’re always raring to go.”

“Yeah, I guess...” I sighed, averting my gaze and focusing on the thriving crowds around us.

People of all walks bustled about around us as we stood waiting for our companion to return. We were smack-dab in the middle of a tiny little community at the center of the city of Buckston. Sanctuary—the city’s last major center of population. It was an old port city located on Equestria’s eastern coast, and a peek into metropolitan life in the time before the Great War. Buckston had never been hit by a direct megaspell blast, but the residual fallout had reduced the city and its surrounding areas into a wasteland just the same as the rest of Equestria, leaving behind nothing but a massive ghost town ripe for resettling.

A few months ago, a local Steel Ranger contingent had engaged in open conflict with a rogue group of pegasi that had defected from the Enclave in order to further their own agenda, demolishing much of the outer city in the process. Craters and ruined buildings could be seen on nearly every street, the debris from some of the skirmishes piling up so high in places that travel was made completely impossible.

At the very center of the city, however, everything was still intact and a burgeoning hub of commerce. Day in and day out ponies traveled through Sanctuary to trade, seek work, purchase supplies for travel, or even acquire medical aid or take up residence in the many unoccupied floors of the massive black obelisk of an office building at the city's center. The tower was the tallest structure in the entire city, and functioned as a hospital, a headquarters for the local talon company, and a shelter for those who needed it.

The citizens of Sanctuary were protected by the local talon company—Obsidian Equestria—a griffon-run mercenary group that made its home in that building—the largest office building in the city, from which they derived their name. Krieg Razorbeak, the talon's leader, was as philanthropist as it was possible to be in this day and age, and put every ounce of effort into keeping his people safe from threats, whether it be encroaching raiders and slavers, or even Steel Rangers.

A sudden commotion caused Peridot and I to turn, and the two of us watched as a small scene unfolded across the street from us. A sudden fracas had erupted right in the middle of the merchant district—the inner circle of a roundabout at the middle of the city, on the sidewalks surrounding the small park at its center.

As we looked on, a pair of griffons wearing armor with the same logo as Peridot's accosted a shady-looking earth pony stallion in a trench coat. One of them—a burly thug with a snowy white coat and crimson accents at the tips of his muddy brown feathers—seized the stallion's foreleg in one beefy claw, causing a cascade of tiny little containers to fall out from within his coat.

Ponies trying to make a quick cap slinging drugs.

Just another day in the Wasteland.

“Dash dealer,” Peridot murmured as the griffons hauled the earth pony away, ignoring his protests and claims of innocence. “I thought Magnus had better things to do than patrol Sanctuary for chem dealers? Oh, well. Maybe Razorbeak and that guy he's traveling with finally made some headway on their search, so he's back to his usual duties.”

Razorbeak was the griffon in charge of Obsidian Equestria—Peridot's boss—and I even knew the ‘other guy’ she'd mentioned. In fact, I was supposed to have helped the two of them hunt somepony down, but I'd gotten caught up in the moment when I'd met Peridot and her partner, who'd hired her for her services. Rolling a shoulder in a shrug, I turned away from the scene as the small crowd that had gathered began to disperse.

Like many of the people bustling around Sanctuary, we were here for a reason. In our case, that was work. The leader of our little group was currently off seeing to that while we sat waiting for him in the middle of town, just idly twiddling our hooves.

“Hey ladies, I got it!” a male voice said from behind me, and I turned to see a unicorn stallion approaching with a small piece of paper held aloft in his charcoal-grey telekinetic field. Combat armor similar to Peridot’s partially concealed his periwinkle blue coat, and golden tresses of blonde mane spilled down to his neck, the dim, cloud-filtered sunlight glinting as radiantly as was possible off of its many waves. Slung across his chest was a bandolier loaded with several different bolt types, and across his back was the crossbow he used to fire them.

I thought it was a rather unorthodox weapon in this day and age, but considering the fact that my own weapon of choice was a polearm, who the hell was I to judge?

“Hey, Longhorn,” Peridot and I chanted by way of greeting as the stallion approached.

“What’s up?” Longhorn said as he slowed to a stop, looking between me and Peridot while he waited for an explanation. “Why the long faces?”

“Caltrop’s worried,” Peridot explained, placing her hooves reassuringly on my shoulders and resting her chin gently atop my head.

“Am not!” I snapped defensively, hopping out from under Peridot. “I jus’ gots butterflies in my tummy, that’s all.”

“That’s *anxiety*, Caltrop,” Peridot explained patiently. “You’re worried. There’s no reason to be worried, Hon. We’ve been working together for long enough now for you to know that.”

“Yeah, Peridot’s right,” Longhorn agreed with a nod. “It’s just another day in the Wasteland for us, kid. We’ll take care of this little job, use the cash to buy a good meal and restock, and then it’s on to the next one. Danger’s an everyday thing here, but we’ll deal with it just like we always do. We overcome it with teamwork.”

I felt my ears droop. “Yeah, but...”

“Hey, come on!” Longhorn said, resting a hoof over my armored shoulders and giving me a little shake. “What’s gotten into you, Caltrop? You’re always the most enthusiastic out of all of us to take on a job, especially when it involves combat!”

“We’re gonna see some action?” I asked, immediately feeling my spirits begin to lift.

“Yep,” the buck beside me answered with a grin, waving the paper he’d been carrying in front of my face. “Doesn’t go into detail, but the client promises a huge reward for a tough fight. We need to meet with him on his property to discuss the details, but it can’t be *too* tough. The coordinates are nowhere near hexhound territory, so whatever it is we have to fight should be well within our ability to handle.”

I glanced at the paper and felt my jaw drop in shock. “Wow, that’s a *lotta* zeros.” I shifted uncomfortably as I weighed the job against the payout. “Longhorn, somethin’ ‘bout this ain’t addin’ up. It ain’t right. We should walk. A reward that fuckin’ big means it’s prolly gonna get us killed.”

“We won’t know unless we try, right?” the light blue unicorn stallion said, giving my shoulders a comforting squeeze. “At the very least, we can just see what the client needs done. We’ll only be out a little bit of our time, and if we come back empty-hoofed, we can always bunk in the OEQ tower for the night.”

“A-All right, I guess,” I agreed uncertainly. I still had a really bad feeling about this job.

“Come on, you two. We’re losing daylight,” Longhorn said, steering me toward Sanctuary’s entry gates. “The sooner we get this one over with, the sooner we can get some decent food in our stomachs. I’m *starving*.”

“You’re *always* starving,” Peridot nickered playfully as she fell into step beside us. “I swear you’ve got a hollow leg.”

“Says the mare who scarfed down a whole *case* of Sugar Apple Bombs in fifteen minutes,” Longhorn teased.

“I work my flank off out here, you jerk. Anything I eat doesn’t get the chance to stick around for very long. There isn’t an ounce of fat below my neck.”

I felt my eyes drift down to linger on Peridot’s flank, and I sort of lost focus of the conversation as I stared intently at her cutie mark- a large ammunition box with a small trio of shotgun shells laid in front of it. It was less the cutie mark I was interested in, and more the particular piece of anatomy that it was using as a backdrop. I felt a subtle stirring down below as I took in the view, each movement of her leg causing the muscles in her flank to tense, emphasizing her toned plot in the most pleasant of ways. She wasn’t kidding. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on there to jiggle.

“You’re catching flies, Caltrop,” Peridot said with a knowing smirk, playfully brushing beneath my chin with her tail, which afforded me another glimpse that I suspected wasn’t *entirely* unintentional.

“Busted!” Longhorn cackled wickedly.

“Shaddap!” I snapped, driving my hoof painfully into Longhorn’s side and causing him to exhale with a wheeze.

“Oof!” Longhorn grunted, “Hey! Easy, kid! Sheesh, you hit hard for a mare your size.”

“Ya, an’ don’t forget it, Longhorn,” I growled, blowing aside the huge lock of vanilla-white mane that had fallen into my eyes. “I been lookin’ out fer myself since I was a li’l filly. I didn’t have nopony t’ do it fer me, so I had t’ teach myself how t’ fight. Ya build up a lotta strength swingin’ around a piece a’ rebar all day, lemme tell ya.”

“It shows,” Longhorn murmured, massaging his tender side gingerly. “Why is it so hard to find a *ladylike* mare out here? I swear it’s nothing but warrior mares or crazy raider chicks. What’s a guy gotta do to find the type of mare who needs help moving a couch these days?”

My reply was cut short by a sudden, unearthly droning hum that set my teeth on edge.

“The fuck?” I wondered aloud.

My answer showed up a moment later as the hum increased in intensity and became a loud roar. Something above us eclipsed what little sunlight managed to get through the cloud cover, and I looked skyward to see a massive black warship streak overhead, heading in the direction of the bay just off of Buckston’s coast. I’d never seen one before, but damn near everypony had certainly heard of them. It was a cloudship. An Enclave cloudship.

“Is that a *Raptor*?” Peridot gasped in utter astonishment. “What is the Enclave doing here? Why are they below the clouds?”

“I don’t think they have business with us Wasteland folk,” Longhorn said, pointing at the ship as it streaked off towards the water. “Whatever its goal is, it’s either overseas or *on* the sea.” Longhorn cast his gaze downward, holding a hoof to his chin thoughtfully. “Still... what in Equestria would bring the Enclave down here to the Wasteland, and with a cloudship to boot? I think we might just be missing an important piece of the puzzle.”

“Haven’t you heard?” We all turned to face a passerby that had heard our conversation and spoken up. “The Enclave has finally made their move. Canterlot is gone. Leveled. They’ve already laid siege to Friendship City, and the most recent news suggests that their fleet is locked in combat with Red Eye’s forces over the Everfree Forest. If I were you guys, I’d find someplace safe to hole up before they attack *us*.”

The three of us exchanged a nervous glance as the stranger went on her way. None of us knew what it meant for the Enclave to be below the clouds, but it sure as hell wasn’t good. Even less so if they’d already destroyed the ruins of Canterlot and assaulted Friendship City. Red Eye could go shit in a hat for all I cared, but if they’d attacked a *populated city*, then it didn’t bode well for us over here in Buckston.

“Definitely explains Caltrop’s unease,” Peridot murmured as she continued to gaze at the now-empty skies. “What’ll you do, Longhorn? I’m still bound by my contract, so you’ve got me until your

payment dries up.”

“Well,” Longhorn sighed, “It looks like we’re going to need that money for something much more important than food. If this is turning out to be a full-scale assault on us, we’re going to need all the supplies we can get our hooves on. That means guns, ammo, medical supplies and anything else we need to keep ourselves alive.”

“We’re still doing the job, then?” Peridot asked with a wry grin and a raised eyebrow.

“Yep,” Longhorn replied, and I quickly slung my halberd across my back, rushing to catch up as he started off at a canter. “Double time it, everypony. Let’s move.”

* * *

“Are you sure that’s the place?” Peridot asked as we paused at the road’s end. “It looks spooky as all get-out.”

Longhorn took a quick peek at the map.

“Yeah, I think so. It *is* a little creepy, isn’t it?”

From where we were standing, we could hear the sound of the surf crashing against the shore. Indeed, where we stood was only a hop, skip and jump from the water. Abandoned shorefront property surrounded us on all sides, but the unsettling locale that Longhorn and Peridot had spoken of was immediately to our right.

The remains of the small seaside amusement park practically oozed foreboding. Small games kiosks were either shuttered or boarded up, and those that weren’t had been broken into and searched for valuables long ago. Within some, I could see faded targets for dart games, some still decorated with dangling bits of rubber that had once been inflated balloons. Unclaimed prizes in the form of ratty old stuffed animals still hung from walls and ceilings, and I noted with some amusement that one kiosk had collapsed, but its target of stacked milk bottles still stood tall after two-hundred years.

Behind the massive arcade near the roadside—the closest building to us currently—the tallest of the old rides rose up just high enough for us to see. Of particular note were a roller coaster and a massive ferris wheel, both of which had been partially if not completely consumed by rust, due in no small part to the salty sea air.

Directly ahead of us was a massive pier that stretched out into the ocean. Wooden posts protruding out of the water near the far end suggested that its end had been much further out than it was currently, much to my surprise. It was pretty damn long to begin with.

This whole place was just an eerie reminder of what used to be. This had once been a place of amusement. Fun. Ponies had shared good times here centuries ago, and now all that was left was a weathered ruin that somepony deeper than me would probably see as a commentary on the horrors of war, using fancy words like *juxtaposition*, 'or some shit. To be fair, it *was* pretty fuckin' creepy. I half expected ghost ponies to fade into view and start walking around going about their lives like nothing had ever happened.

“So... where the fuck are we s'posed t' go, Longhorn?” I asked when nopony moved or spoke up. “We ain't gonna get jack shit done jus' standin' around all day.”

Longhorn stirred with a nicker, and shook his head as if to clear it. “Oh, sorry. Uh, the job posting said that we had to meet him in an old lifeguard tower on the beach, I think.” Longhorn floated the piece of paper out to check it. “Yeah, ‘look for the only lit lifeguard tower,’ it says.”

“Great,” I snorted grumpily. “Gonna get sand in my fuckin' horseshoes. I fuckin' *hate* sand.”

“Time's money, ladies!” Longhorn stated brightly. “Let's get moving.”

I grumbled my dissent and followed behind Longhorn and Peridot, dragging my hooves sluggishly. I was in no hurry to wade into the sandy dunes on that freakin' beach. We made our way across the remainder of the cracked pavement before making the abrupt transition to the beach proper, and I couldn't help but click my tongue and sigh angrily when my forehoof sank deep into the fine grains of pulverized rock. Great. I was *never* gonna get this shit out of my coat.

I slogged my way through the sand after my companions, becoming increasingly more frustrated each time I put a hoof down and it shifted beneath me, bogging me down *just* enough to drive me up the goddesses-damned wall. Thankfully, we didn't have too far to walk, and we approached a fair-sized lifeguard tower- not what amounted to a really tall chair, but instead one of the towers with a tiny little office-sized cube of a room on top of a deck and stilts, with a ramp for easy access.

“Hang out here for a second, I'll talk to the guy,” Longhorn said as we gathered around the wooden planks that made up the ramp. “Won't be but a minute.”

I heaved another huge sigh and turned to look out at the water. In and out, in and out went the surf, dragging with it bits of seaweed dislodged from the ocean floor and depositing them on the shore, where they collected in large piles of dried, tangled brown clumps. The ocean breeze was steady and didn't show any signs of letting up, and was even now tossing my vanilla-white mane back into my face despite my best efforts to sweep it aside. Stupid wind. Stupid beach. Ugh!

“Hey,” Peridot said from beside me, and I felt her rump bump playfully into mine. “Still feeling nervous? Or have you gotten a little more comfortable by now?”

“I feel like I need t’ get off this fuckin’ beach before I stab somepony,” I snapped testily. “It’s a pain in the ass t’ walk, this stupid sand is gettin’ inta places it shouldn’t be, an’ it smells gross, too. I *hate* the beach. Hate it!”

“Just tough it out for a little while longer, Hon. We’ll be through with this soon.”

“Soon’ ain’t doin’ a whole lot fer me *now*, Peridot,” I grumbled. “Gonna be findin’ grains a’ sand in my coat fer *weeks* after this.”

“All right, you two. Ready to get to it?” We turned to see Longhorn making his way down the ramp, holding aloft in his telekinetic grip a tiny, *tiny* little stoppered bottle barely big enough to hold a scant few drops of liquid, which he held out to me. “Here, Caltrop. Take this.”

I eyed the bottle warily. “The fuck is it?”

“Just take it and splash it on you.”

“What *is* it, Longhorn?” I demanded, refusing to take the bottle. No way was I putting that shit on me without knowing what it was.

“Just trust me, okay?” Longhorn unstopped the bottle, quickly splashing its contents against the side of my neck like some sort of perfume before I could move away. “It ain’t gonna kill you. Quite the opposite, in fact. Now come on.”

“W-Wait!” Peridot called out as Longhorn trotted past us and made his way back towards the road. “Longhorn, stop! Will you at least tell us what the client said before you run off on us?”

“An’ what this crap ya just threw all over me is?” I interjected pointedly. It had a sort of sweet, heady aroma that was actually quite pleasant-smelling, despite my aversion to any scents that could be described as ‘nice.’ It reminded me somewhat of honey, or what I imagined fresh-cut wildflowers would’ve smelled like, if they still grew in the Wasteland.

“It’s perfume,” Longhorn said dismissively. “You smell like the bottom of a hoof, and a nice little mare like you shouldn’t smell that bad.”

I could tell he wasn’t telling the truth. Not the *whole* truth, in any event. Whether or not this crap really *was* perfume, it wasn’t causing me any harm at the moment, and the thought of what Longhorn was keeping from us slid to the back of my mind for the moment as we hastened to catch up to the stallion. He continued trotting along even as we caught up to him, meandering to the right once we hit the pavement. Once on the road, Longhorn moved swiftly and with purpose, floating his crossbow off of his back and pulling back the bowstring to lock it into place, pausing at the large wooden ramp that led up to the pier.

“Okay,” Longhorn said with a shaky sigh, and I felt my eyebrows rise in utter shock when I saw him float one of his most powerful crossbow bolts out of his bandolier before nocking it against the bowstring. It was one of his very, *very* few enchanted gem-tipped plasma bolts. “Here’s the story. Our client needs us to clear out a Radwasp nest. They’ve constructed it right in the middle of the pier, and he needs it gone so that he can open the place for business.”

Fuck *me*. Radwasps were bad news. Upsized by the taint and radiation, the fuckers were bigger than an average pony, but their size wasn’t the worst thing about them. The mutations had also turned their venom into a highly corrosive acid, able to burn completely through flesh and bone in a matter of seconds. Not only that, but they didn’t have to sting to use it. Radwasps had the ability to squirt their venom from their stingers at range, making them an *incredibly* lethal foe. No pony liked dealing with Radwasps. No pony with a functioning brain, at least.

My jaw hit the floor at the news, but before I could voice my concerns, Peridot did so for the both of us.

“Longhorn, we’re nowhere *near* properly geared for this job! I’ll probably be able to keep myself alive with my shotgun, but the rate of fire on your crossbow is terrible, and all Caltrop has is a *melee* weapon!” Wow, okay. No faith. “No. No way. Caltrop was right earlier when she saw the payout. This job is way too dangerous. *We should* walk.”

“We’ll be fine,” Longhorn said, though he didn’t sound too sure of himself. “It’s just another day in the Wasteland, ladies. Make sure to stick by Caltrop. Not *too* close, mind; bunching up is a good way to wind up getting all of us melted into a puddle.”

“Wait!” Peridot called out as Longhorn started forward up the ramp and onto the pier. “Longhorn! Why are we going through with this? You told Caltrop that if the job was too dangerous we’d pass it up, but now we’re going through with it anyway? What’s changed?”

“Nothing,” Longhorn shrugged as we reached the top of the ramp and passed through into an old gift shop on the way through to the pier. “I honestly believe we can do this. All I need is one good shot with an incendiary bolt, and that nest will go up in flame. The only tricky part will be fending off the workers protecting the nest. Anything inside will be torched, but if there are any outside when the bolt hits, we’re going to have to deal with them.”

I lagged behind as Longhorn moved on ahead with Peridot in tow, still doing her best to convince him to drop the job. The boards of the old pier creaked under our hooves, and I looked curiously from side to side as we made our way further along the lengthy structure. Much of the right side was open for viewing, with a mere two old shops at the near and far end of the pier, granting a clear view of the beach. The left side however, was end-to-end stands and kiosks.

Faded old signs advertised shops for curios and keepsakes, or even vendors for cotton candy and fresh, piping hot hay fries. Just thinking about food was enough to make my stomach rumble, and I felt myself grow just a bit keener on pulling this job off. Just a bit.

“There it is,” Longhorn said, slowing to a stop and allowing us to step up to stand alongside him.

It had been audible long before we’d even seen it. The sheer size of the Radwasps’ wings made it sound like an entire squadron of bombers was flying just overhead. Attached to the side of a tall building ahead of us was a massive ball of paper constructed by the wasps for nesting, and even now they flitted all around it, some making strange, erratic side-to-side motions before landing to crawl all around the crinkled grey surface. We’d gone unnoticed so far, and we merely observed as the massive insects flew all around their nest, entering and exiting and regurgitating chewed-up wood fibers to build upon their existing structure.

“If this is like your average nest, the queen will be in there, laying eggs,” Longhorn murmured, raising his crossbow and taking aim at the structure. “If I can tag her, this job gets a whole lot easier.”

“Alternatively, you’ll just piss them off and the entire swarm will melt our flesh from our bones,” Peridot whispered angrily, none too keen on drawing attention. “I still think this is one of the worst ideas you’ve ever had.”

“Trust me, Peridot. Just remember what I said,” Longhorn said as he stuck his tongue out and slowly squeezed the trigger. “Stick by Caltrop.”

A tingle shot up my spine as Longhorn’s crossbow bolt took to the air, and I watched with fascination as the enchanted gem began to glow hot, melting both it and the bolt down into a narrow streak of bright green plasma. From that point forward, the next few moments appeared to play out in slow motion. Both Peridot and I went for our weapons while the bolt was still in flight, bringing them to bear in order to properly defend ourselves. Longhorn slid another bolt from his bandolier—this one ringed in red to mark it as incendiary—and drew back his bowstring to nock it just as the plasma bolt made impact with the nest.

The bolt tore clean through the paper structure as easily as a hot knife through butter, punching clear through the other side and soaring off to flicker out of view in the distance. It left behind a hoof-sized hole with a glowing rim, and several deceased Radwasps came tumbling out of the nest to crash noisily to the pier’s surface, their exoskeletons making strange clacking and scraping sounds as they landed.

“Stick close, Hon,” Peridot said, hefting her shotgun in her cherry-red magical aura. “It’s about to get rough.”

“Ya sound a li’l worried there, Peridot,” I teased playfully in an attempt to keep the mood light, giving her a ginger prod with the haft of my halberd. Panicking wouldn’t do us any good against such lethal

creatures. We had to keep our wits. “Listen t’ Longhorn. Stay by me, I’ll protect ya.”

Peridot snorted and rolled her eyes, but that was all she had time to do before all hell broke loose.

Longhorn fired again, and when his incendiary bolt hit the nest, its thermite core detonated, setting the nest ablaze with a very small—albeit incredibly *hot*—gout of flame. Tiny little flecks from the initial detonation spread the flame faster than a wildfire, and it was only a matter of seconds before the entire nest had shriveled up into ash, leaving behind nothing but the charred corpses of the Radwasps that had been within.

The Radwasps that hadn’t been consumed by fire were *not* happy.

My skin crawled as the buzzing around us grew furious, the air practically vibrating as the Radwasps shifted duty from work to defense. Peridot and Longhorn didn’t give the insects time to gain the advantage, and I cringed as Peridot’s shotgun roared beside me, loud enough to set my right ear to ringing. Longhorn was resorting to his explosive-tipped bolts at this point, and I cringed when one such bolt found a home in the thorax of a Radwasp, detonating and blasting us with disgusting bits of bug guts.

Our biggest problem at the moment was keeping nimble on our hooves. Radwasps tended to gravitate toward ranged attack, which meant we had to be constantly aware of our surroundings to ensure we weren’t struck with their acidic venom. Longhorn was catching the most attention, and he hadn’t stopped moving since we’d drawn the attention of the Radwasps, constantly galloping around the pier in a desperate attempt to avoid being hit by the barrage of caustic liquid.

My frustration started to get the better of me the longer I watched Peridot and Longhorn fight. I was stuck with my halberd, and I had no way of helping those two unless I ran up and got stuck in. I didn’t want to ditch Peridot, but watching Longhorn run for his life was starting to seriously get under my skin. I knew how to kill things! I wanted to help!

“Fuck this,” I snarled, galloping toward a Radwasp that was hovering just behind Longhorn, lobbing globs of venom at him while he attempted to deal with the rest of the swarm. When I closed the distance, I cradled my halberd in both forelegs and pushed myself into the air with my hindlegs to gain a little more reach, swinging upwards with the axe blade and grinning with triumph as the steel sliced through the massive bug and cleaved it in two. “Gotcha, fucker!”

“Damn it, Caltrop!” I heard Longhorn growl, and I turned to face him with a chastened look. What did I do? “I told you to stick together! Get back to where you were and cover Peri-”

Longhorn’s orders were drowned out by a bloodcurdling scream, and dread tore at my stomach when I turned around to face back the way I’d come. Peridot was right where I’d left her, but without me to watch her back, she’d been hit from behind by a jet of acid. Even from where I was standing, I could

see plain as day that the highly corrosive substance had eaten clear through her left hindleg, and she was lying on the pier writhing in pure agony and screaming herself hoarse.

“Shit, Peridot!” I screamed, panic welling up inside me as I ran to her. “Fuck, I’m sorry!”

Even as I grew close to her, I could tell it was too late. Her screams grew quieter, and her thrashing less energetic just as I realized the full extent of her injuries. It hadn’t been just her leg. Additional jets of acid had landed on the small of her back, as well as her left side, and I could see raw flesh and bone through her corroded barding. I felt my stomach heave when I took a closer look at the wounds and saw that the acid was *still* eating its way through her. There was nothing I’d be able to do. Peridot was gone.

“Longhorn, she’s...” I muttered, my mind collapsing into a thoughtless jumble of white noise as I gazed down at Peridot’s corpse. “Peridot is...”

“GAH!” Longhorn screamed, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. No... “FF- AAARGH!”

“LONGHORN!”

I hopped to my hooves and ran as fast as I could to the stallion, raising my halberd when I was halfway to him and swinging it with every bit of strength I had, bisecting the Radwasp on top of him horizontally. It had been buried up to the stinger in his chest, and I watched with complete and utter horror as the venom burned its way out of his body from within, eating holes through his chest before dripping onto the pier beneath him.

“YOU FUCKERS!” I screamed to the remaining Radwasps still buzzing aimlessly about. “I’LL KILL EVERY LAST ONE A’ YA, DO YA HEAR ME!? YOU’RE ALL *DEAD!*”

Taking up my weapon, I charged the nearest Radwasp, stabbing out with the pike at the top and spearing the mutant bug through the middle. I swung the halberd as hard as I could, hurling the dead Radwasp clear of the pike and straight off the pier to splash into the ocean beneath. For some reason the fuckers were ignoring me, flying up out of my reach and away. I whinnied angrily before pursuing the nearest one that turned its back on me and began flying toward the far end of the pier. No way were these fucking bugs going to fly away after killing Peridot and Longhorn. I didn’t care if they didn’t have the mental capacity to feel pain. They deserved to *die*.

“GET BACK HERE! COME BACK AN’ FIGHT ME! WHAT, YA COULD KILL MY FRIENDS, BUT YER TOO GOOD FER ME!?”

I started forward but quickly skidded to a stop when the boards cracked beneath my hooves, backpedaling as the wood fell out from under me and plunged into the water. The pier beneath me was so pockmarked full of acid holes, the structure of the planks had been completely compromised, and there was no way I’d be able to pursue the goddessdamned Radwasps to seek vengeance unless I

wanted to go for a fucking swim.

Despite every natural urge telling me to kill, despite the guilt I was feeling at having royally fucked everything up, I turned my back on the Radwasps as they drifted away, glancing at the corpses of my two friends. My only friends. Biting my lip, I moved toward Longhorn, making absolute sure that the acid wouldn't still burn through me before carefully lifting him onto my back.

If I couldn't avenge them, then I could at least pay them the proper fucking respects.

* * *

I sat back on my haunches as I finished settling the last of the pile of sand into the hole that was Peridot's grave. I'd lugged them both down onto the beach one by one, digging their graves by hoof—partly because I didn't have the necessary tools, and partly because I deserved the punishment—and burying them as was proper. As I gazed down at the unmarked graves, I felt tears welling up inside me as the few memories I'd made with these two great ponies came flooding back all at once, and I began to heave with sobs as they brought with them a crashing tidal wave of remorse.

These two had been all I'd had in the world. My first and only friends, taken from me by something that was supposed to be small enough to *step* on. They'd been taken from me because we needed money to feed ourselves, and there was no better way to earn money in this lawless fucking pit than running errands for ponies. They'd been taken from me because I'd fucked up, and by some retarded miracle, I'd been ignored by the Radwasps. They'd been taken from me because this place claimed ponies every damn day, and today just so happened to be the day that Peridot and Longhorn had drawn the short straw.

Just another day in the Wasteland.

I stood and turned my back on the graves, looking out at the ocean and wiping at my teary eyes with the back of a hoof. Out in the middle of the bay, a cloud of low-hanging fog had moved aside sometime between when we'd arrived at the beach and now, revealing an old oil rig still standing tall after all these years. As I looked on, two small dots took off from its upper deck and flew towards the city, and I winced and held up a hoof to shade my eyes as the rig was engulfed by an enormous fireball. What remained of the rig following the explosion slowly toppled and crashed into the ocean with a massive plume of water and a splash audible even from where I was standing.

Just another fucking day in the Wasteland.

Forget Me Not

By Noakwolf

Rocking calmly back and forth, a gray pegasus mare dressed in a thick leather duster sat in a rocking chair. She was laid back and relaxed, a fedora was covering the top of her long blond dusty mane as she enjoyed the quiet day. The air was cool and the town life around her at peace. It was a fine day. Dark clouds were above and a cool breeze was in the air. Yes, it was a good day.

Buildings around her seemed inactive. It was a slow day in this town, and she liked it that way. Though, across from her, two small foals came running toward her. One was an orange coated earth pony filly with a yellow mane. The other, a smaller buck with a blue coat and a short white mane on his little head.

Neither of them seemed to have their cutie marks, and by the look of things, they seemed to be interested in her. Deep down inside, the gray mare prayed they didn't come to her, but one could only hope for so much.

"Lucy!" Both foals exclaimed cheerfully as they approached her.

The sound of their voices broke her peaceful time outside. "Yeah?" She replied, sitting up straight in her rocking chair.

The little buck spoke first, "Glitter Chip told me you know an amazing story... Like, the bestest one ever!"

"Yeah," The filly called Glitter Chip added, "and Conway says I'm lying!"

"Duh, my dad tells the best stories. I bet Lucy ain't got a tale worth telling at all."

"Nuh-uh, she does too know the bestest story!" Glitter Chip interjected.

"No, she doesn't!"

"Yes, she does!"

At this point, Lucy was becoming frustrated by the continuous pace of the children's argument. So, sighing she raised a hoof to silence them. "Listen kids... I'm not too fond of telling the story, and frankly I was enjoying my peace and quiet."

"But Lucy!" Glitter Chip begged.

"I'm sorry, kids, I just don't-" Out of nowhere, she stopped speaking in mid-sentence.

Something had caught her attention. It was a stallion, clad in a suit of thick dark power armor. An army helmet and a red visor along with a breather piece covered the stallion's face, only his red horn stuck out from the helmet's top. A thick duster, not unlike her own, covered the rest of his body. What was odd about him though, was the fact that no part, minus his horn, was showing. It was all covered by thick metal plating, or by the duster.

Galloping at an easy pace the stallion came up to Lucy and the foals. Lucy seemed surprised to see him, as a look of both surprise and confusion could be seen in her eyes. "W-what are you doing here, I thought you were gone on patrol?"

The voice of this odd stranger was low, and dull. Yet stern and calculated. "I had completed a patrol, and I have acquired spare time."

"That fast?" She added.

He did not respond, rather he just gave her a simple nod. The armor-clad stallion looked down at the foals in front of her who looked like they had been groveling before her. "Why are the young groveling to you?"

"They want me to tell them a story, and I said no."

The huge metal clad pony sat down on the ground, "I have acquired time."

"Yeah," Said Glitter Chip, "even he wants to hear the story!"

Lucy looked back at the metal pony with a mournful, yet nostalgic look. "Well... Have you heard the story from when I was younger?"

"Negative." The stallion replied.

She rubbed the back of her neck with a sad look about her, "I didn't think you would've..."

Glitter Chip hugged Lucy's leg, and stared up at her with wide adorable eyes. "Please..." She whimpered.

Lucy felt down deep inside that she didn't want to tell a story. Especially the one they wanted to hear. The only other reason she had told anyone the story beforehand was because a whole group of ponies wanted to hear it. But now, in the presence of him... This changed her outlook on the whole situation.

"Please..." The small filly begged once more.

Lucy sighed, and made herself comfortable in her seat. "Okay, but just this once."

Bouncing with joy, Glitter Chip sat down with her friend, and eagerly awaited to hear the story once more. A sadness churned around in her stomach as she spoke. And while it did take some determination, she forced herself to tell the story.

"Well... Where should I start?"

The trunk of a black old wagon flipped open. Dust scattered itself in the air as light dimly touched the dusty objects within. A red unicorn stallion, with a long scraggly brown mane, coughed and waved a hoof around his face to clear the dust. His light brown eyes scanned the contents of the trunk, only to find that nothing of value was inside.

Patting down his brown trench coat, he shook his head. "Well, still nothing."

A little grey pegasus filly with a yellow mane stood there looking at him sadly, "No food? Not even a little?"

"Not even a mouse sized little." Added the red stallion.

Both of the ponies stood there and looked up the long, desolate road. Old banged deteriorating carts lined the sides of the cracked and blasted highway.

"We've searched all of the good carts already, and still not a thing." The filly said in a discouraged tone.

"Hey, kiddo, cheer up," The stallion said with a smile, "we'll find something. We've just got to try a little harder, that's all."

In the distance, the ruins of what seemed like a large city could be seen. Tall ruined buildings stood still, as the dark clouds hovered above, with the wind whistling. "It's just that I'm hungry..."

"Well, that simply won't do! It just won't. Come on, let's keep moving. Maybe we'll find us something tasty." The stallion chirped enthusiastically.

Trotting lightly, they both continued down the road at an easy pace. "Like, what do you think we could find to eat in the city, Wester?" The filly asked.

"Hmm, I'm not sure. Maybe cake, or better. Cupcakes!" The pony called Wester replied.

The filly's mouth watered as the thought of warm cupcakes filled her mind, "With that pink swirly frosting?!"

"You bet, kiddo." Wester chuckled.

Moving farther up the road, they saw a roadside market. Markets such as this were common shopping centers outside of large cities, and more importantly, food might just be inside. Ripe for the taking.

Pausing along the side of the road, Wester stared at the store cautiously. "We could try there."

The filly scanned the area around the store and said uneasily, "It doesn't look like there's anypony there... Do you think it's safe?"

"If we move quickly, we should be fine. But you're right, there's usually something hanging around these stores. Hopefully, nopony's home, so might just get lucky with this one."

Coming up to the the store, both ponies moved carefully around the side of the building. The filly followed closely behind Wester, who had a gun on his leg ready to fire. And, opening his holster, he peaked behind the corner of the store. He had intended on entering from the back of the building. That way, even if there were traps or someone inside, they would be less likely to get their attention.

Like he had thought, there was a backdoor with nothing around it. Gesturing the filly to move on, they both trotted over to the door. As they approached it, a sense of hopefulness built itself inside them. Only just as Wester tried opening the door, he had found that it was locked tightly.

The once hopeful feeling they felt faded away instantly. "Great..." Wester grumbled.

"What are we going to do, Wester?"

At his side was an old metal pipe that had fallen off of the building. And, picking up in his mouth he mumbled, "Shtand back, Lucky."

Like he had instructed, she took a few steps back, and with several powerful swings at the doorknob, it snapped off. Causing the locked door to easily move back.

Spitting out the old pipe Wester continued to spit out the nasty taste that was left in his mouth. "Lucky. Remind me that pipes don't make good food."

Lucky giggled, "You're so silly, Wester."

Wester smiled at her and pushed the door open. It was almost completely dark inside the store. And

minus the sounds of metallic echoes he had made from his pipe, it was quiet.

"It seems to be empty." Wester said, poking his head through the door.

"Does that mean that there might be food in there?" Lucky gasped happily with wide eyes.

"Yep, it sure does, kiddo. But just remember, vandalism is wrong."

Lucky rolled her eyes at his silliness and followed him inside the old pre-war structure. Wester pulled out a flashlight from his saddlebag and, with Lucky's help, he tied it to his shoulder. The building creaked, and moaned while they walked on. Their hoof steps echoed off of the walls, almost giving the illusion that someone else might be there.

Broken and smashed, the dozens of aisles that once held food seemed to be bare. Only rusted, crushed up cans remain. Lucky picked up one of the cans dishearteningly.

"Aww... So much for food."

Wester walked over to the right of the very last aisle, for next to it was a pushable door labeled, "Storage." Smiling, he waved his hoof for her to come.

"There might be something in the storage. You never know what we might find."

She galloped over to him, and together, they pushed open the door to the storage room. Sadly, not much could be found in the storage either. All that was left were old metal boxes on shelves that were either tipped over, or smashed.

Wester pointed to one section of the small storage room. "Go check those boxes over there. They don't seem as smashed as the others. I'll check these shelves over here."

Lucky stepped over to the boxes Wester had mentioned, feeling down about their misfortune. With each step she took, she kicked one of the empty rusted cans aside, until she almost tripped on something. Stumbling slightly forward, she looked down at what kind of heavier object could have cause her to trip. Oddly enough, there rolling slowly away from her was a can of beans. And a fairly large one at that.

Picking it up, her eyes lit up with joy. "Wester! Wester! Look what I found!" She chimed bouncing over to him.

He blinked a few times at her, and shined his light down on the object she was carrying. Once his own eyes saw what she was so happy about, he too lit up with a cheerful mood. "W-Why... Lucky, that's my girl! This should be plenty for both of us."

Lucky glanced at the worn labeling on the can. "It should be enough for both of us, but they're a little old... And a little stale."

"I'm glad me and the beans have something in common." Wester chuckled.

"Stop it," She laughed playfully nudging him in the foreleg, "you're not old."

Their happy moment did not last long. A sudden loud bang instantly sent frightening chills down their spines. The bang was followed by the sounds of doors being slammed opened. What came next, was the last thing they wanted to hear. The voices of other ponies. And not just the voices of scavengers, but sound raiders.

Wester put a hoof to his mouth and motioned Lucky to follow him. Both ponies stepped lightly as they came to the door that lead back out to the store, before placing their heads right against it. Together, they listened to the unexpected company to confirm whether or not they were friendly.

From what they could hear, it had sounded like there were three ponies. Each stallions, with rough scratchy voices. Wester turned off his flashlight quickly, and listened to them speak.

"Hacksaw, check over there. The boss will have our heads if we come back empty hoofed. Dozer, you check those aisles, and keep that gun of yours ready. There's a whole pack of ghouls around here, and the last thing we need is to stumble onto the fuckers."

Pushing the door slightly open, Wester stuck his head out to get a look of who was where. Luckily, the cover of darkness hid him well from their sight. As he scanned the market around him he tried to see what weapons the ponies were armed with. It was already clear that one had a gun, and it was likely that the others did to.

In the darkness, he could faintly make out the shapes of the ponies. From what he could see, it looked as if they had roughly configured armor made from various pieces of scrap. Along with what looked like outrageously styled manes, he was absolutely sure they were raiders.

Moving his head down to the little filly at his side he whispered, "Lucky, stay close to me, and step lightly. If we're careful enough, the darkness should keep up out of sight. Now, we're just going back the way we came, so it should be simple, right?"

She nodded at him, "Right. Easy peezy."

He smiled at her, and pushed the door open slightly more for both of them to move through. Just as Lucky left the storage room, Wester eased the door shut and lead her back the way they came. They kept themselves low using the aisles as cover. All the while they did their best to avoid the dozens of

cans that littered the floor.

The raider's hoofsteps echoed loudly off of the walls as the scavenged. "You find anything?" One raider called out.

"Nope, not a fuckin' thing. It would help if there was some fucking light in here!"

"Here, let me see if the lights to work. Sometimes these old place got generators." The voice replied.

The two ponies continued to move easily to the back exit, and just as they did, a loud click echoed through the store. A loud hum followed, and a few lights overhead flickered on. The once shadow covered store was now flooded by light exposing the two ponies.

One raider had just left an aisle, and saw them. "What the hell? Hijack, I found somepony!"

Several insane laughs followed from the pony named Hijack who could be heard dashing over to his comrade's position. "Don't just stand there, kill them! Fresh meat! Oh, won't the boss be happy about this!"

Terror filled the two ponies, but Wester knew she needed to be protected. Pushing her forward, he shouted at her as he charged the pony who had spotted them. "Run, Lucky! I'll hold them off!"

Lucky did as she was told, and ran off toward the back exit. Wester pulled out a knife from a sheath on his coat. Sprinting toward raider he tackled the pony fiercely. Like he had guessed the raider was armored with various pieces of scrap. What was even more relieving was the fact that the pony only had a spiked bat as a weapon.

Both of them wrestled on the ground, tugging, and beating each other ferociously. With the knife gripped firmly in his mouth, Wester took huge clean swipes at the raider. Large bloody gashes were across the raider's body with blood profusely leaking from his wounds. The raider named Hijack, a purple unicorn stallion with a large mohawk mane saw his comrade fight with Wester.

In the corner of his eye, he saw Lucky running off toward the exit. "Quick, Hacksaw, get the girl! I'll take care of this fucker!"

Levitating at Hijack's side was a double barreled shotgun ready to fire. From his current position, both Dozer, and Wester were in view. It was difficult to take a shot, so he galloped toward the two in hopes that he could blow Wester's head apart right next to him.

Wester finally managed to pin the raider to the ground and slam the end of the knife into his neck. Blood shot out from the wound, as with each of the pony's fading heart beats more blood would squirt out like a fountain.

Laughing madly, Hijack with his weapon ready came right next to Wester, and putting the gun's barrel against the back of his head, he smirked. "Nighty nighty, asshole."

Before he could fire, Wester ducked, and when the first shot of the raider's gun went off, Wester got low. Using his hind legs, he bucked the raider in the face causing him to stagger back and drop his weapon. Hijack swore before he recovered himself. By then, Wester already had the gun in his mouth, and with the last shot, Wester shot him in the head from point-blank range.

Falling to the ground, Hijack's body twitched unnaturally. Wester dropped the gun from his mouth tasting the blackened raider saliva. Although, his eyes widened as a terrible sound froze him.

"Wester, help!" Lucky cried toward the end of the store.

Along with her cries for help, he heard the devilish chuckles of the raider named Hacksaw. "Stop squirming! I'm jus' going to have a little fun with ya is all!"

Fury burned wildly inside him and sprinting as fast as he could, he made his way to the source of the cries. There, near the exit they had come through, was the raider, his hooves wrapped round her with a huge grin spread across his face.

"Wester!" She cried once more, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Rage filled his mind, and a magical aura surrounded his horn. His eyes glowed brightly as the magical energy consumed his body. And, with a powerful blast of magical power, the raider let go of Lucky, and rose up into the air. Bucking and fighting the raider panicked as he was lifted higher, and higher into the air.

"What the hell! Put me down! Fucking put me down right now!" He wailed in panic.

But soon, the raider started to be consumed by the magical energies around him, and screaming horrifically in pain, he disintegrated into a fine dust. No sooner had the raider turned into dust that the power around Wester faded. And with all of the magical energy gone, he fell to the ground coughing hoarsely.

Lucky was shaking and, as the soft specs of dust fell on her, she saw her friend kneeling on the ground coughing. "Wester!" She exclaimed rushing to his side.

Each hacking cough Wester made had caused large amounts of blood to come spilling out of his mouth. His legs were trembling, and his voice had become low and raspy.

She had one hoof on his back patting him gently, and in an urgent tone she asked, "Wester, are you

okay? You did it again. You used your magic again."

Taking deep breaths Wester stood up wiping the blood from his mouth, "I'm... Fine, Lucky. It's just... He had you and..."

"No!" She interjected. "I know I was in danger, but you know what happens when you use magic! You know what it does!"

She hugged his leg tightly, sobbing softly into the sleeve of his brown coat. He looked down at her tremble on his leg with her eyes on the verge of tears. And hugging his leg tighter, she muttered worryingly, "Please... Promise me you won't use your magic again... I don't want to see you hurt yourself..."

He coughed lightly a few more times before responding, "Lucky... Sometimes I..."

"No, promise me..." She said tearing up while hugging him.

Placing his other foreleg around he whispered back to her, "I promise... I promise I won't use my magic again."

She looked up at him sniffing, "You promise?"

"I do." He answered softly with a warming smile.

And patting her on the back, he said in a reassuring tone, "Come one kiddo. Let's get out of here... It's getting late."

The night was still, smoothly, the wind howled stirring the dry powder-like dirt of the wasteland ground. After the incident with the raiders, they moved on into the ruins of the old city where they found temporary shelter. They had took shelter inside an old apartment complex near the outskirts of the city. The complex itself was simple, cozy, and protected.

Holes were blasted through some sides of the walls. Old support beams above were split in two, while those beams that still stood seemed to be holding firmly the ceiling above them. They were on the second story of one of the apartments. There was a nice dry carpet and a few pieces of devastated furniture helping tie the place together. A small balcony was at the end of the room. Giving the two an outside view of the area around them.

Wester had lit a fire with low flames, that produced little to no smoke. On top of the fire was a steel pot with the beans they had found earlier bubbling softly. Wester was stirring the beans slowly, carefully

making sure that all of the pot's contents were receiving the same amount of heat.

Sitting near the fire, Lucky gazed at the low flames sadly. She firmly held a dirty old blanket around her body, as a cool draft went through the building.

Wester stopped stirring the food for a moment and turned to her. "Lucky? Are you okay?" He asked.

She looked up at him and shook her head. "I just feel sad..."

Stirring the beans in the pot a few times he asked, "What are you sad about?"

Taking the blanket, she wrapped it around her more snugly. "I just don't want you to go."

"Heh," He chuckled, "I'm not going anywhere any time soon, kiddo."

Lucky didn't reply, leaving a brief gap of silence between them. And, tapping the end of the spoon on the edge of the pot, he said, "Dinner's ready. Do you want some?"

She nodded, retaining her sad expression. Pulling a bowl out of his bag, he poured some of the piping-hot food into it. He slid it over to her and smiled at her warmly.

"Eat up, kiddo. You'll need the energy."

Taking the bowl with her hooves, she sat and began eating. Giving her a playful look, he said, "I know how to cheer you up. Will that make you feel better?"

Cocking her head to the side, she gave him a puzzling look. "Well! I guess you'll need just that, after all, nothing fixes the blues like some good ol' cheering up!"

Lucky scooted over to the side of the fire to see what Wester was talking about. Quickly, he made his way over to an old television set that was against the wall. Fortunately for him, the giant piece of old-world technology had wheels. While not very good ones, it made it easier to move. A huge hole was blasted straight through it as he rolled it over to her.

Taking the empty can of beans he tossed it over to her. She caught it and peered at it oddly. Wester got behind the television set to where she could see him through the hole.

Pointing the the empty can she held he said, "That's the remote. Use it to change the stations."

Holding the remote with both hooves she pressed down on the can making a clicking sound with her mouth. Wester then proceeded to make a whooshing noise to make it appear as if the television were changing channels.

Standing up on the other side of the television he started to speak in a dull tone. "Today's weather will be sunny... Maybe. With a slight chance of sunshine... Maybe... And then we'll have rain. Lot's of rain. So pack your umbrellas kids it's going to be-"

Lucky smiled, and pressed the can again while making the same clicking sound once more. Wester changed moods instantly, as though another show was on. And in a serious voice he acted as if he were in space.

"Space... The final frontier... This is the voyage of the starship Galaxia. It's mission... To find new-"

"Click." She said giggling.

Quickly Wester changed the way he acted, and ducked low to the ground to the point to where Lucky couldn't see him behind the television. "Filmed before a live studio audience." He said without showing himself.

Within moments he had started to sing, "Sunday, Monday, happy days! Tuesdays, Wednesday, happy days! Thursday, Friday, happy days! The weekend comes, my cycle hums. Ready to race to-"

Pressing the can she giggled once more, "Fast forward."

Wester began to act as if he were moving fast, and pressing the can she laughed. "Play." She chuckled.

Wester quickly started to pretend he was in the show. "Well, how are you doing today?"

"Terrible," He replied to himself, "Becky just took my wagon!"

He gasped, "Whoa there, partner! You? And Becky? There's a shocking thought!"

Putting his hoof to the side of his mouth he made a low laughing sound as though the audience was laughing. Lucky started laughing at the stallion's antics. Only after a few seconds of laughing she began to cough roughly.

Wester stopped what he was doing instantly and came to her worryingly. Resting a hoof on her forehead he asked, "Are you okay? Do you have a fever, or are you choking on something? Or-"

She playfully nudged him back and giggled, "I'm fine. Some of the bean juice just made me cough."

He whipped his brow in relief and sat next to her. "Well, I'm glad you're okay. Did you like that, or was it too much?"

She snuggled next to him with the blanket wrapped around her. "Yeah. I liked the one about the pony and Becky."

"I liked that too." He cooed putting a hoof on her head and ruffling her mane.

After he ruffled her mane, she rested her head against his foreleg. "Wester?"

He looked down at her. "Yeah, kiddo?"

"You've told me that you can't use magic because it hurts you... Why does it hurt you?"

He took his free hoof and rubbed the back of neck unsurely. "Well... I'm not sure you want to hear that story."

She nuzzled his foreleg closing her eyes before giving him a sweet yawn. "I want to hear it though."

"Well," He hummed in thought, "I guess you deserve to know."

She started to gently breath and listen to his story. "When I was a younger buck, me and a few friends of mine went traveling. Until one day, we stumbled upon a group of raiders outside of this old factory. We fought them pretty well, my buddies had the other raiders but I was fighting with this one raider that strayed off from the main group.

He was pretty tough, and he gave me some serious knocks to the head. It turns out that the factory we were fighting in was filled with barrels full of tainted gung. He thought it was a good idea to stick my head in it... I tried to fight back against him, but he managed to get most of my horn in it... Ever since then, my magic's been strong... But it costs me."

"Will you ever get better?" She muttered tiredly.

He smiled contently at her brushing a little of her yellow mane to the side, "I hope so. Maybe your uncle at Ironstead can fix me."

"I hope he does... Then you won't get hurt anymore."

"I hope he does too, Lucky, I hope he does too."

"Wester?" She asked once more.

"Yeah, kiddo?"

"Can you sing that song for me? That song you were singing when you found me."

"Sure..."

For some reason, he found it hard to sing the song she had mentioned at first. Sighing heavily, he built up the nerve to start singing gently to her.

*"Here I stroll down this lonely road,
searching for a home,
then I found you all alone,
soaked to the bone.*

*We ran on through the world together,
seeing a world I never saw,
oh we made up new numbers,
and we gazed upon the water,
in everlasting awe.*

*Here I stroll down the road,
I'm not lonely or sad or mean,
now we walk on through the days,
like a an everlasting dream."*

Small, soft snores came from her as she drifted off to sleep with her head resting on his leg. He looked down at her and smiled, feeling a wonderful warmth fill his chest.

"Goodnight Lucky. Get your rest, we've got a long day ahead of us." He whispered letting her sleep soundly.

The sound of soft clinging metal caused Lucky's ear to twitch. At first, the sound didn't bother her, but as a chilling breeze brushed against her grey coat, she shivered. She tried to pull the blanket she had wrapped around her tighter to prevent the breeze from hitting her. Sadly, a combination of both the draft and the rattling metal had finally woken her up.

She sat up rubbing her eyes sleepily. Smacking her mouth she could tell her mouth was slightly dry. "Wester?" She cooed tiredly.

Scanning the room around her, Wester was next to the balcony packing their things inside their bags. By the way things had looked, Wester seemed to be almost done packing their things. The last few items that he was packing were the pot, and bowls along with a group of papers with pens. As he packed the pot it clanked loudly, at the very least this explained where the rattling was coming from.

The once warm comforting fire was now reduced to nothing more than a chard, smoldering collection of blackened wood. Tiny bits of smoke rose up from the smoldering pit, as a few embers kept what was left of the fire burning.

Wester noticed that Lucky was up, and quickly put the last bowl inside his bag. "Did I wake you up, kiddo? If you want to sleep a little longer I can give you little more time to-"

"No," She a yawned stretching out her forelegs, "I'm up..."

He smiled at her putting his saddlebag on his back, "I didn't sleep too well last night, so I got up earlier and started packing us up."

Taking the blanket she used to sleep with she handed it over to Wester, "Did you sleep well?" Wester asked.

Lucky took her hoof and rubbed the side of her head, which felt slightly sore. "I slept okay, my head kinda hurts though."

He kneeled down to her, "You probably slept on it wrong. But that's okay it'll go away in a little bit."

She blinked at him, in his eyes she could tell he had something interesting to share. "Hey, you wanna see something cool?"

The thought of what this *cool* thing was intrigued her. "Sure, what is it?"

Motioning for her to follow him he lead her to the balcony of the old abandoned apartments. Unlike the night before, the whole area around them was now visible, as gray light from the twisted cloud cover above illuminated the world around them. For miles, land that was once consumed by darkness was now visible.

The ruins of an old city surrounded them. Taller three, to four story brick buildings lined the edges of cracked streets filled with rusted wagons from days long since passed. In the distance was a large yellow antenna. One that looked as if it broadcasted some kind of signal out into the wasteland.

Wester pointed to the distant yellow landmark, "You see that?"

Lucky nodded at him seeing the antenna in the distance. "That's our destination. Ironstead. If what I've heard about that town is true, it should be protected enough from raiders. Which means that your uncle should be there safe and sound."

"How far away is it, Wester?"

"Hopefully, not far. It's near the center of the city, and by the way the land around here looks, we'll have to do some exploring to get around some of the more blocked areas."

A sense of excitement filled the filly's heart. The very thought of her uncle warmed her, because after their long trip, this was the end. The final stretch of their journey. And nothing would get in their way of reaching Ironstead.

Patting her lightly on the back, Wester playfully chuckled, "Come on, kiddo, let's go. If we move quickly, we should make it there in no time! And who knows, those swirly pink cupcakes just might be there waiting for us!"

Together, they strolled out of the old apartment complexes into the ruined streets of the old city. Like Wester had mentioned, several buildings seemed to have collapsed entirely, causing some of the more direct paths to be blocked by the rubble. This didn't bother them much, for whenever they came at an impasse such as this, they tried finding another way around.

Most of the time, they did find alternate routes, though it just made their job of reaching the town that much more of a challenge. It didn't take them too long to reach the main street of the city. Following the road straight down would take them right to the city's center.

Trotting along the sidewalk, echoing metal bounced off of the pre-war structures. Eerie was the whole city, and the bleak lack of sound fueled this strange feeling. Wester kept in mind that even though all was quiet at, any sudden moment that silence could be easily broken by the sounds of gunfire. Every now and again, he would scan the area around him carefully while they moved. To him, it was very reassuring to have some understanding of the environment around them. Just because this was their final stretch didn't exempt them from being attacked at any moment.

To their right was an old corner store. Like most of the other buildings in the city, it too was a damaged deteriorating building of the wastes. Near the store's entrance was an beaten up Sparkle Cola machine. Smaller dents covered the sides, along with cherry red chipped paint peeling off it's front. The light over the machine which advertised the product flickered sporadically.

Wester stopped and glanced at the machine. "Hey Lucky? Are you thirsty?"

She paused too, turning her attention to the machine he was looking at. Her mouth was dry, and looking at the machine near the store's entrance did seem inviting.

"Do you think that machine still works?" She asked.

Wester shrugged, "It won't hurt to find out would it?"

He nudged her gently, "Let's go take a peek. Maybe there's still some cola inside."

They both came over to the machine. Dirt stained broken glass crunched underneath their hooves as the machine made a low, almost daunting humming sound. Wester rubbed confidently his hooves together peering down to the filly at his side.

"Watch a pro in action kiddo..." Wester boastfully said taking the knife from his side.

Holding the blade firmly in his mouth, he stuck the end in a groove along the side of the machine. All the while, he muttered to himself as he attempted to pry the machine open. Pulling hard the machine ached, and moaned metallically. He grunted applying more direct force to the machine's opening groove.

Lucky observed him uneasily, and stepping up to him she asked, "Do you... Need any help?"

He raised a hoof up to her and shook his head, keeping the knife dug firmly into the machine. "Nah, I'm good. Jusht... Give me a second..." He tiredly uttered.

With a few more good pulls, a loud snap made both of the jump slightly. The loud noise they had heard however, was followed by the machine's door creaking with the now opened cola machine ready to be looted.

With one hoof, he pushed the cola machine's door to the side exposing the inner-workings of the contraption. Both ponies stared disappointingly into it. Rusted gears and valves filled the machine, and what little soda was left, wasn't even soda. It was just bottles. Dusty old bottles that were empty and dry.

Rubbing top of Lucky's head he flattened his ears mournfully, "Sorry, kiddo. Looks like we won't get a chance to drink anything till we get there."

No sooner had he said that, that her eyes got wide with excitement. For near the end of the mess of bottles looked like a brown bottle filled with some kind of liquid. She reached inside, and in her hooves she held a full bottle of Sparkle Cola.

Wester stood there baffled by the site. He grinned an embarrassing grin while scratching his thick brown mane on his head. "Well, shoot. I am getting old if I didn't see that. They say the first signs of old age is blindness after all."

Twisting the cap off of the bottle's top, a crisp satisfying hiss graced their ears. Bubbles formed near the top of the inside the bottle, not before quickly returning to the normal brown fizzy liquid it once was.

"Drink it up, you found it. You deserve it." Wester admirably added.

She glance down at the bubbling drink, and shook her head raising it up to him. "I won't have any unless you have some too."

Wester was slightly taken back by her response, "I'm fine, kiddo, you found it. It's yours."

"No," She insisted, "you opened the machine, so you get some too."

"Well, shucks kid," He smiled thankfully picking up the drink with one hoof, "you know you still could of had the whole thing."

She shook her head at him giving him wide sparkle filled eyes. "I know, but you deserve some to. You're my friend, and my friends get to share what we have."

"You're a sweet kid, you know that?" He replied taking a few sips of the carrot-flavored beverage.

He sighed blissfully before taking his last few sips. "Here," he said giving the rest of the bottle to her, "you have the rest."

She smiled, taking the soda with her small hooves. "See. We share what we've got." She said taking a few large gulps of the soda herself.

Before they knew it, the bottle was empty. She sighed contently feeling the carbonated drink tickle her belly. Dropping the now empty bottle on the ground, they moved on.

As they trotted off down the street Wester kicked the bottle to the side. "Next time ,we'll have to make them last longer than that... Lest we get infected with the hiccups."

They both chuckled softly to themselves as they continued onward down the main street of the city. Overhead, the clouds twisted. The sound of thunder echoed in the far off distance, breaking the eerie silence of the ruined city.

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A rusty bent can rattled and shook as it leaped forward. Lucky was kicking the can forward with one of her hooves, smiling while she did so. It entertained her, and seeing the look of content happiness on her face warmed Wester's heart. The two had come close to the end of the main street, for across from them was a massive bridge.

The cables and supports that once held the bridge together now creaked loudly as the old weathered steel of the structure ached. A dry riverbed lay underneath it; old sewer pipes that once leaked old

sewage into the river now sat dry like the river that was once before them.

Demolished carts lined the sides of the bridge. Some hung off the edges, holding onto the edge tediously by the old twisted railings of the bridge. Lucky had started to get a little ahead of Wester, and this made him worry slightly. He wasn't sure what was inside the city, for even while they had not seen much thus far, the possibility of danger lurked around every inch of the ruins.

"Kiddo, don't stray off too far." Wester called to her.

She kicked the can a few more times before responding to him, "Okay Wester. I just want to kick it a few more times."

He kept his gaze on her for a few moments before quickly scanning the area around them. From where they were it would only be an hour or so to the settlement of Ironstead. Wester knew that if they continued on the path, they were going at they would surely reach their destination by then.

Suddenly, a terrifying shiver raced down his back. His ear twitched as the far off sound of voices reached his ears. Terror filled him, and getting low to the ground he moved as fast as he could to Lucky, who had not yet heard the voices.

She gleefully prepared to kick the can once more, only before she could Wester came to her side with a panic-struck look. Urgently, he whispered to her. "Lucky! Get down!"

At first, she was puzzled by his behavior, but when Wester had that terrified look on his face, she knew that something was wrong. Complying with his orders she immediately got low while he rushed up to her. Staying low, they moved behind an old concrete divider near a charred wagon by an alleyway. By now, the voices he had heard were more clear.

The voices in question were rugged, scratchy, and rough. Much like the voices of the raiders they had encountered the day before. Wester raised his head carefully over the top of the divider, trying his best to not expose himself.

"What is it?" Lucky asked with worry in her voice.

Wester continued to peer over the top of the divider for a few more seconds. "They're raiders... Quite a few of them. They're probably the gang those raiders we found at the store belong to."

From what he could see the raiders seemed to be scanning the area. They were not on a patrol, the way they investigated everything they passed suggested otherwise. They were looking for something; or rather, someone.

Each raider was heavily armed, equip with some sort of rifle and armored in thick leather barding. A

mare spoke first, who sounded like the leader of the group. "You find anything yet, Split Tooth?"

"Nah, nothin'. Not a fuckin sign of anything." The stallion named Split Tooth answered.

Her voice became agitated, "Then keep looking! I want to find the ponies who murdered our guys! When you do find them bring me their fucking heads!"

There was a low tired murmur that came from the rest of the group. "And quit your complaining! If we don't find them soon, that ghoul herd that's been roaming these parts will, and I'll be damned to see them get torn to pieces by some mutated freaks first!"

The two ponies were horribly scared. The fear of the raiders finding their location caused the terror inside them to intensify. Lucky looked up at Wester with a frightened expression in her eyes.

"What are we going to do?" She asked Wester, keeping her voice to a minimum.

Wester surveyed the area around them. In the alleyway something caught his attention. An old sewer entrance. The raider's voices grew louder, as with every passing moment they grew closer to them.

He pointed to the sewer entrance's brown lid that lead down into the sewers below. "There, we'll go down there."

Lucky gazed up at him curiously, "Where will it take us?"

Wester glanced over the divider for a split second to check the position of the advancing raiders. "Hopefully past them. Once we're away from them, we'll finally make it to Ironstead."

Before Lucky could respond, a stallion in the raider group shouted. "I think I heard something! It sounded like it came from over there, behind that cart!"

Urgently, Wester took hold of one of Lucky's hooves. "Come on! We need to move!"

Together they dashed down the alleyway to the sewer entrance. He did his best to lift the heavy cast iron cover quietly. Once it was removed from the sewer entrance, a ladder was exposed leading down into the dark underground.

Wester motioned his head toward the ladder leading down into the sewer, "Go down, Lucky, hurry! And don't worry, I'll be right behind you."

She climbed down into the hole unsurely, making her way down slowly. Once she was far enough down, he jumped quickly inside taking the heavy metal cover and placing it back on top of the sewer's entrance.

It was pitch black. The sound of water rushing down the tunnels echoed off of the walls loudly, and a musty moist smell filled the air. Wester made his way down to the bottom of the ladder, upon which he removed his flashlight from his bags and turned it on. Instantly, the small area around the two ponies was illuminated.

Lucky felt slightly nervous by all the darkness around them, so moving herself close to him she hugged his leg trembling slightly. He just looked down at her for a brief second, and kneeled down to her.

"Lucky... Sugar. Don't be scared." He whispered in comforting voice.

He took the knife from his leg and presented it to her. "I think you should take this. It'll protect you from any nasty monsters. "

She sat on her haunches taking the knife with both hooves. "I... I... Don't know if I can take this..."

He gave her a reassuring smile. "Sure you can."

"What if I hurt somepony or-"

"I know it might seem scary at first, but we've all got to defend ourselves." He said resting a hoof on top of the knife's hilt.

"This isn't a toy kiddo. It doesn't have any fancy lights or action phrases. It's a tool."

Wester took one hoof and pointed directly at the space between his eyes. "If anything, or anyone tries hurting you. Take the end of that knife and plunge it right between their eyes. And if you can't get them there, try their neck or chest."

With the hilt she put the knife close to her chest, "I... I think I understand."

"Just remember, kiddo, use it only as a last resort. Just because you own the knife, it doesn't mean it can't harm you too."

She took the knife in its sheath, and tied it around her leg. Chuckling, Wester ruffled her mane playfully. "I swear, at this rate, you'll become a little warrior in no time."

Lucky managed to return a small smile, and gesturing his hoof for her to follow him he said, "Come on, kiddo, let's see where this thing ends."

In the darkness they moved, only the light from Wester's flashlight gave them sight in the dark underground. As the two ponies moved on, they came to a large room filled with pipes and pressure

tanks. The rushing water seemed to part off from their path. A sign painted in chipped white letters read, "Exit" with a small white arrow painted below it was on the side of the doorway leading in. All along the top, and sides of the walls were old pipes. Rattling, hissing and leaking out built up pressure.

Treading lightly, they entered cautiously. Beside the large iron pressure tanks were several larger than average crates. Each crate was stacked neatly on top of the other, while the two ponies didn't pay the wooden boxes any mind, they still took into account that they could be used as a form of cover in case they ran into something... Less than desirable.

The room didn't seem to end, and flashing his light towards the end of the room there in white painted letters was the words 'Exit' above a door. As they came to the door at the pressure room's end a horrible, ghastly hiss echoed throughout the room. Both ponies froze where they were. Staring directly at the exit nearly fifty ponies away, the two could make out the dark figure of someone. Or rather, something.

Wester nudged Lucky worryingly and turned off his light. He put a hoof to his mouth, signaling that they needed to be quiet. She nodded back to him, and back the two went to the wooden crates. Unlike the rest of the sewers, the room they were in gave off a greenish aura off of the walls. It wasn't dark enough to be blind, but not illuminated enough to be seen easily.

Heavy hoof-steps could be heard, as their sounds echoed off of the walls clearly an anxious sweat started to build on their brows. The sound of ghastly panting shortly followed. Wester looked over the top of the crates to make out the dark silhouette in the room with them. Lucky poked her head up as well, trying her best, she found it hard to make out the odd creature.

It seemed to limp, and shuffle slowly around the room. "It's a ghoul..." Wester whispered.

"A what?" Lucky responded quietly.

"A ghoul. They're ponies who took in a little too much taint for their bodies to handle."

"So they're like zombies?"

"Yeah, like zombies."

He glanced once more over the crate and checked the room quickly. "It looks like there's only one... But I'm not sure, maybe two? I don't know... If just get close enough though I can kill it quietly."

Lucky felt worried for her friend's safety. "Be careful..." She muttered.

"I'll be back kiddo, this shouldn't be too difficult." Wester said before moving around the crate, and up to the ghoul.

He stepped as lightly as he could, trying his best not to make a sound. As he came up to the creature however, he stepped on some gravel that he had not seen. In the quiet room the sound was loud, and clear.

Like a watchdog snapping to attention the ghoul perked itself up and scanned the area around it. At this point, Wester knew that killing it quietly may not be an option. So, to be safe he pulled out his pistol.

With it gripped tightly in his mouth he continued his advance. The horrifying creature sniffed the air and moved itself in his general direction. He became shocked. Wester stood absolutely still in terror as the monster came closer, and closer to him. Finally, it was within an arm's length from him. If there was any time to take on the creature, now was the time.

Pulling the trigger back, he fired the gun, only instead of a gunshot the gun made a disappointing clicking sound. He panicked. The gun had jammed on him, and putting its full focus on him the ghoul shrieked and tackled him.

"Shit!" He swore as it pinned him to the ground.

The gun had fallen out of his mouth and into the darkness. Above him, the monster bit and snarled at him like a mad dog trying to kill its prey. With both of his fore hooves on it's chest, he kept the creature off of him. But it had its full weight on him, and he knew he wouldn't last forever.

"Lucky, hurry! Get the gun!" Wester cried out struggling to keep the ghoul off of him.

Lucky's heart pounded as she raced to Wester's aid. Desperately, she searched for the gun near him. Only, without some sort of light, it seemed almost impossible as the dark worn metal of the weapon camouflaged itself well with the dark floor. She did what she felt was right next. She pulled out the knife from her side with the intent of killing the ghoul.

However, out of the darkness, another ghoul leaped out onto her. With the knife still in her mouth she struggled desperately to get out of the second creature's grasp. By pure force and determination, she wiggled free and confronted the monster. Her heart pounded fiercely as fear spread itself through her body. But she had to be brave. For Wester, and for their survival.

Taking a massive swipe at the ghoul with the knife she managed to lodge the whole knife into the creature's side. It cried out monstrosly in pain, staggering back from her for a moment. Sadly, the creature's pain did not keep it from coming back to her. This time, it was filled with a monstrous rage. And, in a mad frenzy-like state, it attacked her.

She screamed as it hit her, and pinned her to the ground. "Wester! Help me!" She cried.

Her cries rang loudly in his head. Out of pure emotion, a magical aura formed around his horn. In one powerful blast of magical energy the ghoul on top of him blasted into dust. He stood up, eyes glowing a bright velvet color, with his horn glowing equally as bright.

"Leave her alone!" He screamed madly blasting the demented ghoul above her.

With half of its head vaporized, the ghoul fell to the ground dead. Lucky had her forelegs blocking her face. She was shivering, with her eyes closed.

Wester coughed hoarsely as his legs became weak. He found it hard to keep himself balanced for all of his sense were disoriented. The room around him spun, and a loud ringing filled his ears. Wester could feel the blood flow down from his nose while he stumbled and coughed.

He crashed into a wooden crate trying his best to keep himself together. But no amount of will or determination could prevent his body from coughing up blood.

Lucky slowly got up from her position. Desperately came over to him as she listened to him wheeze, and cough loudly. Moving to his side she took one of his hooves.

In a worrying tone she asked, "Wester? Are you okay? Did it hurt you?"

"Wha... What?" He mumbled shaking his head and blinking.

"Wester? Are you okay?" She repeated once more.

Slowly his sense started to return. His head pounded, and his chest felt sore. "I'm... I'm fine... Did... Did it hurt you? Are you hurt?" He answered weakly.

She put a hoof to his forehead. "No, I'm fine... You feel warm and you sound weak."

He coughed a few more times, trying to cope with the pain. "I'm fine... It just got a few good punches at me, that's all..."

"Don't ever scare me like that again, Wester... Please don't..."

He stood up messaging the side of his head with one hoof. For a moment, he coughed softly a few times, clearing out the last of the blood from his coughs. "I'm sorry, kiddo... It won't happen again... I didn't know there was two of them."

She took one of his hooves, and shook her head. "I just don't want to lose you..."

"Don't worry, kiddo. You won't... I don't plan on leaving you any time soon... I thought I had told you

that already." He answered as calmly as he could, while still repressing the urge to cough.

With the sleeve of his coat he wiped away the blood from his nose. "Come on... Let's get out of this place. We're almost there."

Lucky didn't reply as he walked toward the exit. She just looked at him with worry. Truly, she felt scared for him, even if they were so close to their destination, an awful feeling rolled around inside her. And as she trotted up to his side it bothered her. Maybe it was the fear inside her. The fear of losing him. She wasn't sure, and only time could tell whether they made it or not. Going down those dark sewer tunnels though, she felt that this part of the trip had been the longest thus far, and the most challenging.

[hr]

The heavy cast iron lid of the sewer in the middle of the road lifted up and to the side. Out from the hole emerged Wester, who stuck his head out to scan the area. The cool dry breeze blew against his long brown mane. For the moment, everything had seemed safe. Only the same sort of blasted wagons, and ruined buildings of the old city surrounded them.

"It looks safe." Wester called down to Lucky.

One by one, they came out of the old sewer hole. However, Wester still felt the pain fester inside his head, yet he ignored it. Though as time went on it seemed the more he tried to ignore it, the more worse it became. But to keep Lucky calm, especially when they were so close, he gave no sign to indicate that the pain bothered him.

Finally out of the sewers, the two inspected their surroundings. Behind them was the bridge the raiders were at. And almost half a mile away was the massive steel gate of Ironstead. The gate itself was at the very end of the road. Taller skyscrapers stood tall along each side of them, and Iron wagons beaten, knocked over, or demolished littered the long path ahead of them.

Wester's legs felt weak, he could tell that it was becoming difficult to move. Raising a hoof to his eyes he tried to view the gate of the town from where he stood. "There it is Lucky... We're... We're almost there..." He huffed tiredly with a heated sweat started to build on his brow.

Lucky glanced up at him unsurely, and putting her hoof to his head she felt the hot temperature of his brow. "Wester, you're burning up, maybe you should sit down-"

He shook his head and started to walk in the direction of the gate. "No," He insisted, "we're almost there... We can make it."

She didn't feel right seeing him in such a bad state, but they needed to keep moving. Their destination was right before them. All they needed to do now was reach it.

As they continued on, more and more, they realize that skeletons littered the streets. While corpses of this nature were a common site in the wastes, these particular specimens were different. Each was armed, and clad in bloody roughly configured armor made of scrap. Possibly ponies who had in the past encountered the ghouls that surrounded the area.

One even lay with a armed and loaded rocket launcher. Could these ponies also be raiders? Or were they something else? The armor suggested that they were raiders, for even the armor was covered in crude and perverted symbols. Wester didn't seem to notice, for even his walking had become sluggishly. Each step he took seemed to be more of a shuffle than an actual step.

They just kept moving straight, and taking a step over the armored skeleton with the rocket launcher, Wester tripped. He fell flat on his face, though his trip had managed to trigger something. The weapon beeped loudly, and with a loud click it fired the rocket. Wester got up, recovering himself.

Whilst rubbing his sore face the rocket flew toward the bridge. Lucky and Wester saw as it soared through the air before coming into contact with an old flight wagon that had been stuck on one of the main support beams of the bridge. Both of them flinched as the explosion echoed clearly through the silent landscape. In addition to a loud explosion, the wagon fell down from the top of the support. It came down crashing destructively against the ground.

Both ponies looked back at the bridge nervously. Wester blinked and said, "Maybe nothing heard that-"

Wester was rudely interjected by the sound of a powerful gunshot. One of the old glass windows of a wagon next to them exploded into pieces following the fired shot.

Not too far off from their position could they hear the sound of ponies crying out in rage. And over the bridge they saw the raiders they had so desperately tried to avoid. They were in full gallop, weapons armed and ready to kill.

The two pony's eyes widened in terror. "Run, Lucky! Run!" Wester cried.

Together, they gave all they could to run away from the oncoming raiders who charged to them. Wester's feeling of weakness slowed him, almost to the point of a light jog. Lucky didn't want to leave him, or in anyway abandon her friend. She nudged him urgently with desperation in her eyes.

"Come on, Wester! We're almost there! You can do it!"

Wester was huffing, and panting heavily. "I'm... I'm trying, kiddo..."

Bullets soon started to fly by them. At the pace they went at, the raiders were already halfway caught up to them. The bullets hit the rusted metal of the wagons around them sending out sparks, and chipped metal flying.

Lucky looked back one more time to see how much ground the raiders had covered. Only to her surprise, the once intimidating sound of bloodthirsty uproars were replaced with the sound of agonizing pain and mayhem. A sense of great fear overcame her at that instant. For it was not just the raiders that had heard the rocket go off, but a large ghoul herd as well. The very same that the raiders had remained cautious of.

"Wester! We have to run! Come on!" She urged him.

He was wheezing unnaturally, giving off small coughs as the sweat on his brow became worse. The gunshots of the raiders could be heard as they desperately tried to fight off the herd. Though, second by second the gunfire slowly faded.

Lucky could see several ghouls detach themselves from the main herd madly dashing their way toward them. The ghoul's speed was quick. They ran nearly twice the speed the raiders had, and within moments, they would be upon them. Wester quickly glanced back at the horrifying monsters quickly come closer to them. Looking back to the gate he saw how much farther they needed to go. They still needed to cover another five hundred feet of ground before even coming close to the gate.

Even before he could get two hundred feet the ghouls would have caught up with them. Seeing the condition he was in he stopped. Sweat dripped down his face as he stood there, a contemplative look spread across his face. Lucky halted, and in panic took his foreleg and pulled on him.

"Come on, Wester! Come on! They're coming!"

He was breathing heavily, coughing small but hoarse coughs as he spoke. "No... Kiddo, you have to go on."

She looked up to him in shock. "W-What?! No, I can't leave you! You need to come on, we're almost there!"

"They're coming too fast, and I won't make it... Not like this."

Tears began to roll down her small grey cheeks. "No! No! You can't stay, we can still make it!"

Wester looked toward the ghouls who were almost at them. He gritted his teeth as tears built up in his eyes. By now, even if he tried to slow them down, one or two of them would get to her, and he wouldn't let a single one of those monsters touch her. In a low, unsteady voice he whispered.

"Lucky... I'm... I'm sorry..."

She looked up to him. Eyes wide, and tears flowing down from her eyes. Forcefully picking her up, he took her to one of the wagons next to him. One that had an enclosed cabin with dirt windows and doors. There she could be protected from what he was about to do.

She kicked and fought him viciously. "Wester, put me down! Don't do it! Please don't! Please don't!"

Opening the door to the wagon he pushed her inside and slammed the door shut. Taking an old metal barrel next to the wagon he pushed it in front of the door. Looking back to her one more time he said.

"I'm sorry."

She got up, and from the inside of the wagon she pounded on the window crying. "Wester... You promised me..." She whimpered.

Wester had tears run down his cheeks as he stood there ready to embrace the oncoming herd that charged toward him. He took in a deep breath, and sighed. "You've got to keep it together, Wester... You have to do this, for her..."

Closing his eyes he could hear the heavy pounding hoof steps of the nightmarish creatures. Softly, he sung to himself as the aura around his horn grew brighter. His eyes soon started to glow, and as he felt the magical energies flow inside him he faced the ghouls.

With large tears rolling down the sides of his face he cried blasting them with powerful beams of pure magical energy he sung, *"Here I stroll down this lonely road... searching, for a home... then I found you all alone, soaked to the bone."*

Each ghoul that was hit with his magical energy turned slowly vaporized into piles of pure white ash. *"We ran on through the world together... seeing a world I never saw... oh we made up new numbers... and we gazed upon the water, in everlasting awe... now we walk on through the days, like a an everlasting..."*

And as the last of the few ghouls dissipated into dust his energy began to subside and the once brightly glowing aura in his eyes and horn faded.

"Dream..." He muttered feeling the energy slowly disappear, and feeling his body become consumed with pain, he fell to the ground.

Lucky was determined to get to him, and taking the knife he had given her she used the hilt to break the glass. With the blade she cleared away any extra parts of the window. Jumping out of the wagon she

rushed to his side. Holding his head with her hooves she looked down at him with the smoldering piles of the ghouls, now turned to ash surrounding them.

Wester was coughing large amounts of blood from out of his mouth. Her tears fell down onto his brown coat as she spoke to him. "Wester... I thought you said that you wouldn't leave me..."

His hoof was trembling terribly, and brushing her yellow mane to the side, he said as warmly as he could, "D-Don't cry, kiddo... I... I promised myself I'd always protect you..."

She buried her face into his chest and cried. "I don't want you to go... You're my only friend..."

"Shhh," He replied softly resting his hoof on her back, "You can still make it... I'm sorry I couldn't make it with you... I'm... I'm sorry... Please... Make...I-It..." His voice became weak, until his coughing, and breathing stopped altogether.

She rose up slowly from his chest and looked at him sobbing. "W... Wester?" She muttered.

She shook him slightly. "Wester?" She asked once more.

"Wester!" She shouted shaking him.

"Wester, please get up! Please!"

She looked around at the empty ruins around her, and shouted as loudly as she could holding her friend in her hooves. "Help! Please help! Somepony please help!" She cried into the silence.

"Please," She cooed crying, "please... Help me... Please..."

From afar, on the top of the massive steel wall of Ironstead, a pony looked out the poor pony cry through the lenses of a pair of binoculars. He was an orange unicorn with a red mane, and dressed in a set of blue dusty cloths. A rifle hung at his side by a strap as he continued to look out at the sad pony.

Another pony, this time a muscular green earth pony stallion, came up to his side. "What's going on out there?" He asked the orange look-out pony.

The pony removed the binoculars from his eyes to address the stallion. "That pack of ghouls, sir... One pony out there took them all out..."

The stallion raised an eyebrow at him, "What? That whole herd?"

"Yes, sir. The whole thing."

Turning his attention to the small grey pegasus in the distance he pointed toward Lucky. "And who is that out there?"

"Her? Well, she was with the stallion out there, sir. It doesn't look like he survived the herd, sir."

Both of them could hear Lucky cry out for help once more. "Sir... It's just her... What are we going to do? Protocol states that we're not supposed to waste resources on wanderers when ghouls could be around."

The earth pony stood there for a moment, listening to the hopeless pleas of the filly. "Send some of our boys down there to get her."

The look-out stallion looked puzzled by his order, "Sir?"

"That's an order, and if you don't, I'll have you tell command how you disobeyed me when I gave you a direct order." He added sternly.

"Y-yes sir... I'll go get some pony right now on it." He answered before making his way down the wall.

Staring out at the small filly, the stallion sighed to himself. Not letting so much as another word leave his lips. How could he speak? Hearing the cries caused him to remain silent, and as the filly's voice rattled around in his mind, he watched her. Hoping for the best.

[hr]

A green line on black metal monitor spiked up and down at an easy pace. Each time it spiked up, it made a slight beeping noise, indicating the heart rate of the patient connected to it. Attached to the machine by thin white wires was Wester. He laid on a white examination bed, motionless. His eyes shut tight and his breathing shallow.

A small chair was pulled up to the examination bed's side, which Lucky sat on. With her hooves folded on the bed, she buried her face sobbing softly. The room around them was gray and plain. Counters were covered with a variety of medical instruments. Be it syringes or tubes containing various medical potions, the counters were littered with the equipment.

In a box near the corner of the room was a set of old power armor. Her uncle used to be a medic, and the power armor was a memory of the days he had traveling the wastes.

An old ceiling fan with four lights connected to it spun above them slowly. A door at the end of the room opened and stepping through it was an older pony. The pony in question was Lucky's uncle, who wore a long white lab coat. He was an unicorn whose mane was silver, and his coat a dark gray.

Perched neatly on his nose was a pair of old glasses which he pushed up onto his nose slightly every other moment.

Lucky raised her head to see who had come through the door. Taking her hooves she wiped away some of the tears from her face. "Uncle... Will... Will he be okay?"

He bore a saddening look as he came to her side. Sighing, he answered her in a mournful tone. "Lucky... Whatever his mutation is, it did a number on his body..."

"How bad is it?" She asked quietly.

Rubbing the back of his neck unsurely, he replied, "Several major blood vessels throughout his body have ruptured. His brain is suffering from severe tension... I'm afraid he's beyond any help I can give him here..."

"But there has to be a way!" She insisted.

"Like I had said before, I don't have the resources or help to help a pony in his condition. Not only this, but he is beyond the help of medical potions."

"But..." She cooed taking one of Wester's hooves, "He's my friend... I... I don't want him to go."

"I'm sorry, Lucky," He said wrapping a hoof around her, and in a comforting tone he added, "but I've done all I can to help him ease into the next life. I'm afraid your friend won't last past the next two days."

She began to cry once more, "Are... Are you sure there isn't something we can do?"

He sighed sounding unsure, "Only if there was some way I could give him a machine which healed the stressed ruptures around his body, and repair the hurt parts of the brain, I could theoretically keep him alive."

Lucky looked toward the power armor in the corner of the room. "What about that?" She asked pointing at it.

He turned his gaze to the box of armor. "My armor?"

"Doesn't it have magic healing stuff? Can't it do all the things you said?"

"It can... But, I'm not sure what the outcome might be..."

Lucky thought for a moment, contemplating about the option which circled around in her mind. "Will

he be okay if you put it on him?"

Scratching his head he thought about her idea. "It would save him... But to make sure the brain becomes repaired, I'm going to have to let the system replace parts too stressed to function."

"Will he be the same? That is... If you do it?"

He shook his head at her, "The section of his brain that holds memories will be the part most affected. Some parts of his personality will stay, but I can't guarantee that he'll remember you, or anything you've done together."

Lucky found it hard to speak, for the sadness inside her made her choke up. "Will he be able to live normally?"

"He won't be himself completely, but yes. He'll still have to eat, drink, sleep and rest like any other pony."

"Will he be able to live... Happily?"

"It is possible. I can't say for sure."

She smiled, looking at her friend rest peacefully. "As long as he's able to live a happy life..."

"Are you sure you want me to do this? Even if he doesn't remember you?"

"I don't care if he forgets me," She added giving off a warm smile, "I just want him to be happy. Because I've got to protect him now... He's my friend and I won't leave him behind."

"If this is what you truly want for your friend, Lucky," Her uncle said hugging her, "I'll do it. I'll try and save him."

[hr]

The gray pegasus stopped her story, smiling. Rocking back and forth in her chair she had a few tears roll calmly down her cheeks. "Well kids... That's the story." She muttered..

Both kids folded their fore-legs and pouted. "Last time you left it at the same place! I want to know how it ends! Were they happy? Did he make it out okay? What happened!" Glitter Chip exclaimed.

"Yeah," Conway agreed, "I want to know how it ends? Where they happy in the end?"

"Listen kids, you asked for the story, and I've told you the story. If you don't like it make an ending up."

"But Lucy!" Both of the young ponies begged in unison.

A few more tears rolled down her eyes, "Listen kids I said-"

"Were they happy in the end?" The armored stallion asked.

Looking at the stallion, she sat there speechless. "Were they?" The stallion asked once more.

Smiling at the stallion, she gave him a loving smile. At first she didn't say anything, though looking at him in her uncle's armor. Building up the will to speak, she answered him.

"Yes, Wester... Yes they were..."

Garden

By G-Man64

“That’s like saying oh I held someone’s head underwater but I didn’t kill them the water did.”

“Another day another bout of hunger pains,” I said sighing loudly. “Life hasn’t been easy since I decided to leave my Stable, but I didn’t have a choice after what happened. The problem is that I’m so used to the fresh food we had. I won’t say those apples from the orchard were great but they were a lot better than the pre-war crap I’ve been eating for the last few weeks. It seems like we never even have enough to keep going, at least thanks to this stupid rationing system you implemented.”

“Will you please stop?” my companion asked me. “I get it, alright? You hate the life you now have outside your comfy grey shelter. Well you want to know something interesting? I never had any of those luxuries! I’ve lived my whole damn life out here! I’ve NEVER tasted something fresh out of a garden. Be happy about the luck you had and don’t complain about what you’re doing right now. You made your bed now LAY IN IT!”

I frowned, remembering that my ‘friend’ has lived out here forever. Well he’s not so much a real friend as a companion of necessity. He’s a survivalist and a good one at that. He taught me how to handle a weapon, how to pick locks, even how to hunt and clean animals (closest thing to ‘fresh’ food I’ve had but again I use the term loosely since well everything’s irradiated to hell even after cleaning the mutated animals to the best of our abilities we still take a couple Rad-X’s before our meals). What I’m saying is without him I’d be dead.

"What, no response?" he said with a smirk, "Normally you'd have some response by now. I finally break ya?"

"No, sorry," I replied, "just lost in my thoughts. Look, my Pipbuck says that there's supposed to be an old shopping mart near here. Maybe maybe we can re-stock?"

"By re-stock I assume you mean stuff your face?" he said with a slight chuckle.

"SHUT UP!" I yelled with a blush. I had to admit, he wasn't entirely wrong. I was committed to being full for once in my life, since coming to the wasteland.

The final shot rang out, the final raider slumping to the ground. Smoke drifted away from the bullet hole in the stallions head.

"Well saw that coming," my companion said returning his gun to his saddlebag. "These places are huge havens for their sort. Plenty of food, lots of protection, not to mention loads of new wastelanders who think they'll find lots of food. Easy pickings."

We started forward towards the old shopping mart. Time had not been kind to the old place, and neither had the raiders. Mangled remains of dead ponies littered the area, and a crude wall made of literally anything the raiders could pile into a heap had been erected around the front of the place to try and keep out any visitors. My eyes widened as my friend trotted ahead of me to the side of one of the raider corpses.

"Wait... you knew we'd be in for a fight and you led me into it anyways? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Look, you can only learn so much from animals. You needed to fight some intelligent enemies," my companion replied as he kicked one of the raiders' saddlebags. A partially eaten book fell out onto the ground. My companion's eyes rolled as he picked it up and deposited it into his own bag. "Well, semi-intelligent."

"Yes... clearly they thought brain food was the same as real food. You know real food, right? Like what WE NEED?!" I screamed.

"Ugh. Cut your whining already. Let's see if they left anything around."

"Alright. But I wasn't whining I was complaining."

"Well," I said as we exited the shop. I had a frown on my face that didn't even begin to express my level of disgust. "That was a bust. All we found was a box of cake mix, some dirty water, and some copies of Wingboner. Why do we need this junk again?"

"Erm... umm... uh..." My companion was blushing brightly, tapping his front hooves together as he searched for an answer. Finally he grinned sheepishly, "Warmth?"

"Right... warmth," I said sarcastically, rolling my eyes.. "That doesn't change the fact that we still need food."

"Like this?" Both of our heads turned immediately to our left. An earth pony ghoulishly stood there. We hadn't even heard him walk up! Draped across one of his outstretched forelegs was a completely fresh and absolutely juicy looking carrot. My mouth watered at the sight of it.

"WHAT THE!?! WHERE IN LUNA'S NAME DID YOU COME FROM!?! Also, where did you get that carrot?" My companion yelled in surprise. The ghoulish raised what I assumed was an eyebrow, but I

couldn't really tell over the rotting flesh of his face.

"Well, to answer your first question... I appear wherever somepony needs food. To answer your second question, haven't you kids ever heard of a garden?"

"Who cares where it came from, it's mine!" I shouted, pouncing forward and grabbing the carrot from the ghoul's grasp. In one swift movement I gulped down the sweet, juicy vegetable and sighed. "Man... that is good." The ghoul's expression turned to a grimace as my companion smacked me upside the head.

"You dolt! What are you doing?! Haven't I taught you anything? Nothing is free out here!" he said angrily. The ghoul smiled as I pulled some caps out of my bag.

"Oh. I'm sorry, here you go for the carrot," I said grinning sheepishly. The ghoul waved a hoof, pushing my outstretched money back at me.

"Thanks, but there's no need for that," he said. "I'm just glad to share the bounty of my garden with those in need. Perhaps you'd like to stock up there before continuing? It's just nearby."

"YES!" I yelled.

"NO!" my companion yelled at the same time. He was fuming now. The ghoul sat there impassively, tapping his hoof on the concrete. He looked... bored.

"So... are you coming or not? I do have others to visit, you know," the ghoul said.

"Like it or not," I said glancing over at my companion. I adopted the sternest face I could. "We need food. He's offering us food, for free no less. Plus, I'm still hungry."

"No YOU need food, NOTHING is free, and..." he paused for a beat, "Actually, you got me there."

"Well, then if you will follow me. Like I said, it's not too far away from here," the ghoul said, turning to walk in the opposite direction. He shuffled loudly along slowly. I blinked. How in the heck had we not heard him walk up to us?! Shaking the thought from my mind, I trotted along after him. My companion let out a sigh, and did the same.

A short time later, we appeared in front of an iron gate that looked like it had been rusted shut. Drywall had been placed on the other side of the gate, along with the rest of the fence, likely to prevent others from seeing the inside of this ghouls private garden.

"Here we are," the ghoul said. He fished a key out of his saddlebags and slid it into the lock. "While

you're here eat what you desire and take what you need to travel on."

The ghoul pushed the door open and my jaw dropped. Inside the little compound was the absolutely most incredible thing I had ever seen in my life. Strong looking trees, bearing apples redder than any Stable orchard, stood in rows near the back of the compound. Vines filled with purple, green, and black grapes lined the walls, and three large fields of fields of carrots, potatoes, and even tall grass for making hay populated the rest of the garden. In the center of the garden lay a sturdy wooden table, a massive feast of epic proportions laid out before us. the ghoul motioned for us to follow him towards the table.

"Please. Sit. Eat. Be merry. I insist," the ghoul said, motioning to the chairs on each side of the table.

"Don't mind if I do!" I exclaimed happily as I picked up what appeared to be a piece of pie. Without a care in the world I rammed it into my mouth, letting the ooey-gooey goodness slide down my throat. The ghoul turned to my companion.

"And you? Will you not join your friend at the table? The food is quite lovely," he asked. My companion frowned, looking very pensive.

"I'm still not sure..." he replied.

"Come on," I said stuffing my face full with another large piece of pie. "It'sh good! Just dig in!" My companion rolled his eyes. He finally sat down at the table.

"Well... I guess you're not dead," he said. He glanced around the table and picked up a piece of pie. After sniffing it curiously for a moment he popped it into his mouth. "Hey you're right. This is --"

Pain wracked my body and my eyes widened. My companion and I fell out of our chairs, hitting the ground hard. I tried to stand, but found myself unable to. All I could do was roll about in pain. My stomach felt like it was going to explode and my muscles were getting weaker and weaker by the second. From the fleeting glances I was getting of my companion, the same was happening to him.

"I... I told... told you..." my companion managed to choke out. "Nothing... nothing's free," he rolled over, his body spasming for a brief second before he finally went still. The ghouls eyes lit up.

"Your friend was right. Nothing is for free," he mused. I tried to growl, the sound from my lips coming out as something more akin to three cats mating.

"You... you tricked us... you... you BASTARD!" I yelled with the last of my breath before I felt something inside of me burst. I gurgled loudly, fluids flooding my mouth and preventing me from talking further. The ghoul grinned widely, showing off silvery fangs as opposed to pony teeth.

"No..."he said. My eyes widened as the being in front of me became enveloped in a green flame. After it dissipated, standing above me was... me. The me-pony licked its lips. "The only one you have to blame is yourself. I only lead you here because you wanted fresh food. It was your own fault you're in this predicament."

I gurgled in response, trying to scream at the pony or whatever the hell it was that had taken my body. The me-pony trotted over to the table, picking up an apple from it. It smiled sweetly using my own face.

Now you're going to do me a little favor," it said. "You're going to lead somepony else here and then they'll do the same as you. And so forth, and so forth. After all... the plants have to be kept alive. My beautiful, beautiful garden. It gives me all the love I need."

I gurgled again, my eyesight starting to fail. Then the me-pony looked down and smiled.

"Oh I'm terribly sorry about all this. But I need the love of my plants to survive. It sustains me," it said sickly sweet in my own voice with a demonic smirk. "You do understand don't you?"

As I slid deeper into death's embrace I heard a chuckle from the lips of the imposter who had stolen my face. My heart failed completely as I heard these final words.

"The circle of life continues. My garden will thrive. Unfortunately... that means the end of you."

Heresy

By TheBobulator

“We are the only salvation this tortured planet and its ponies have. Without us, equinity is sure to perish.”

Tap-tap. Tap. Tap-tap.

I was wearing a hoof-shaped pattern into the pitiful excuse of what this dive considered to be a table. My other hoof stayed on the saddlebags lying on the bench next to me as I scanned the relatively quiet pub for the pony I was meeting.

Tap. Tap-tap-tap. Tap-tap. Tap. Tap-tap.

Sure, the alcoholic a few tables down was beginning to look annoyed and the barpony wouldn't stop scowling at me after I'd shot her radio, but I kept up my tuneless beat nonetheless. It wasn't like I had anything better to do while I waited. As I waited, I flicked a few clumps of grime from my gold-plated horseshoes and adjusted the peaked cap on my head and brush a few errant black strands of hair out of my face.

One of an Inquisitor's symbols of office was the hat—a peaked officer's cap with the Circle of Steel's logo on it. The logo was similar to the Steel Rangers' own, except that the sword was replaced with a shield to symbolize the Inquisition's purpose of intelligence and law enforcement. Usually it told Steel Rangers my rank, but currently it was serving as a social deterrent.

Tap-tap. Tap.

“Thin pony, can I *get* you something? A drink, perhaps?” the barpony asked loudly, not bothering to cover her insolent tone. “Or maybe you'd be more comfortable with a snare drum?”

More insolence from a worthless waste of resources. “I'm fine, thank you,” I calmly replied, giving her one of my well-rehearsed smiles lest I summarily execute her on the spot for speaking to an Inquisitor of the Steel Rangers in that manner.

The only thing harder to take seriously than a wastelander was a fat wastelander. The rotund barpony resembled a minotaur-sized grapefruit with a face. She had a comparatively neat green mane tied into a bun, which horribly contrasted with her bloated yellow-orange coat. She probably looked a lot more pleasant once a certain level of inebriation was reached. Unfortunately for me, I was still

mostly sober and very alert.

If the battered old clock barely hanging onto the far wall was a mere semblance of being in motion, my colleague was only about thirteen hours late. Quite impressive, considering I had only been sitting here for fifteen minutes. I sighed, woefully wishing for a replacement for my broken pocket watch. At this rate, I was starting to get the feeling that I'd been tricked into coming to this run-down establishment.

An old zebra that had just trotted in caught sight of me. "By the nine, you actually came!" he exclaimed, ignoring the burly stallion that pushed in right after him.

Being slightly more privy to the long-forgotten secret of education, zebras generally tended to be better with the written word. Shameful as it was, that explained why the writing on the note was actually legible. Sworn enemies or not, it had brought to light rumors of high treason from within the Steel Rangers. Blood was thicker than water, but information was thicker than blood.

While I had been distracted by my abrupt mental tangent, my contact dropped himself into the seat across from me. Zebras all looked basically alike, and this one was no different—black stripes, arbitrary mohawk, lack of cutie mark. I estimated his age at about thirty-five, only because he had a sort of older voice.

"I know your type—down to business." The zebra tilted the trilby on his head back as he lounged in the creaky chair across from me. "I've got a problem, and you've got a job to do, buddy."

I leaned forward and slapped the zebra's hat right off his tiny head. "First of all, I am not your 'buddy'. You will address me as 'Inquisitor Soufflé', with respect toward my seniority and rank. Are. We. Clear?" In case he was just as slow as most wastelanders normally were, I carefully enunciated those last three words.

The zebra shrank back in his seat. "Okay, sorry Inquisitor. I'm just saying that your Steel Rangers are seriously overstepping their bounds." That could be interpreted in a few ways.

"Elaborate," I ordered, sitting up straighter. "We'll see if you've been a good use of my time. If not, I hope you don't mind being in the redecorating business."

"Huh?"

What a thick creature. "I plaster your brains all over the far wall."

"Oh. Well, uh, some Steel Rangers r-recently moved into the place around Seapony Energy and they've been wrecking the local trade," the zebra quickly stammered. "They've glutted the stores with healing potions, supplies, ammunition, everything! You've got to put a stop to it."

Misappropriation of resources wasn't too severe, but they were supplying those damn wastelanders with gear that the Steel Rangers could use more. "What else can you tell me? What kind of weapons, perhaps?" I asked, somewhat intrigued.

The zebra shakily nodded. "Like, i-it's small ballistics for now. Submachine guns, pistols, but that's only because they're slowly going through their weapon stores and giving away what they're not using."

That meant it would probably escalate to assault rifles and laser weaponry once they'd finished cleaning house. "And what of their Elder? Do you also know this, zebra?" I spat.

"Their Elder is called uh—something Rolls, I think. He regularly preaches about 'helping the wasteland' and 'redeem the unworthy' and stuff like that. Last time I checked, that's not really what you Rangers are about, are you?" The zebra slowly slid down in his chair and tried to reach his fallen hat without taking his eyes off of me. "By the way, Inquisitor—you may want to investigate what else they're up to. My employers have lost quite a lot of, uh, inventory thanks to them."

Against my better judgement, I had to believe the zebra until further proof surfaced. "And this broadcast—when and where is it?" That would be the deciding factor.

"What time is it, then?" the zebra asked, checking the clock on the far wall.

I sighed. "It doesn't work."

The zebra shrugged. "Uh... it should probably be soon though. It's on the wide band—you can't miss it." An open broadcast for all to hear, hm?

"Your cooperation is appreciated. For the convenience of the Circle of Steel and for your own safety, please stay in the area in case further questions arise. Failure to do so may result in summary execution. Have a nice day," I droned, only for the sake its meager intimidation value.

I began to stand, but the zebra quickly dug a piece of paper out from somewhere and tossed it onto my bags. "Please read that soon!" he hastily whispered.

"Get out of my sight before I purge you like the outsider scum you are," I snarled, picking up my belongings.

The zebra shakily nodded and scampered off like the coward he was, strangely followed by the pony that he'd been followed in by. Irrelevant. Probably had a small bounty on his head or something. No matter, I'd gotten the information that I had been promised. Time to pay the local contingent of the Steel Rangers a visit. Seapony Energy? I knew where that was.



The Seapony Energy Southeast offices were located a good distance outside the former city's limits. It only had two floors—"had" being the key word since most of the building had been reduced to rubble at some point. Most likely there was an underground portion to the whole thing, as it had the generic "corporate mass-produced concrete building" look.

"State your name and purpose, Ranger," a loud booming voice rang out across the wasteland.

He sounded a lot like somepony asking for thirty lashes.

For a moment, I thought my peaked Inquisitorial cap—the one that plainly showed the symbol of the Inquisitors—may not have been on my head. "I repeat, state your name and purpose!" Somepony was about to get forty lashes if he didn't figure out who I was very soon.

In case these Rangers were really this dense, I made sure to stand my ground and keep all my weapons hidden or stowed. Even as my very obvious Inquisitorial over-armor trenchcoat billowed in the wind, I was very seriously thinking that these sorry excuses for Steel Rangers were really too stupid to remember our strict code.

I continued to stand a few yards away from what passed as the entrance of the base, scanning the ruins for the Ranger that also really wanted a month on latrine duty. Evidence of heavy defenses were nonexistent, which wasn't atypical for a Steel Rangers base out in the middle of nowhere. Perhaps they'd resorted to using landmines instead.

A different, smarter voice now rang through the air: "Apologies for the delay, Inquisitor. Please approach the front gate so we can confirm your identity." That was more like it.

When I reached the front door area, a pink-maned Steel Ranger with the identifying marks of a Paladin Commander emerged. I doffed my cap at him, wherein he bent his head low in a bow. Oh good, somepony that knew his place. By the time he looked back up at me, I had my Inquisitor's crest in hoof and almost against his nose.

"Hail, Inquisitor...?"

"Inquisitor Soufflé, Sector 14-A."

The unhelmeted brown-coated Ranger held out his hoof. "Paladin Commander Rumcake Rum, at your command. Or Rumcake, whatever you prefer. Again, apologies for the delay earlier. Knight Red Wine has been a little slow ever since he took that grenade to the face."

Speaking of marred visage... “Paladin Commander Rumcake, where is your helmet? What if one of those degenerates had a sniper rifle?” I asked, also noting his lack of helmet mane.

Commander Rumcake nervously chuckled. “It’s still in the wash?”

I groaned and facehoofed. “Commander, the rest of your contingent had better not share your inappropriate humor.” The Elder here really didn’t try to keep everypony in line, so it seemed.

Commander Rumcake coughed. “You’re a long way from your jurisdiction.” I noted this change of topic, although it was a valid question. Ultimately a stupid question, however, since my jurisdiction technically never ended anywhere.

“The Inquisitor assigned to this sector, Inquisitor Lobster Penne, is missing and presumed dead. I have been sent to investigate my colleague’s untimely demise; however, I have been hearing an awful lot about your contingent as of late. Give me the grand tour, would you?” I gave him my sincerest smile, realizing too late that I might have given away my true intentions too quickly. “This is also a sparse welcome, I’ve noticed.”

“We’re a bit short-staffed on the moment. For some odd reason, the Elder has commanded me to send more Rangers than I’m comfortable with out on expeditions. Losses have been, uh, unfavorable as of late.” Commander Rumcake sighed. “Would you like the grand tour or would you like to meet with the Elder first?”

“I’d like to have a few words with the Elder. Also, make sure Knight—uh... White Wine gets his thirty lashes.” Which was generously lenient, if only because of his disability.

“His name is Knight Red Wine.”

I nearly tripped over the threshold of a breached entry hole as we walked into the building. “That’s what I said.” I made a mental note of the name, just in case.

“I must have misheard you, sir,” Commander Rumcake smartly replied back.

What a quick learner. No wonder he was a Paladin Commander. These were the kind of ponies that the Steel Rangers really needed. Smart, tactical, and by the book. Unfortunately by my first impressions, everything was probably about to go downhill. By the end of the day, an Inquisitional report might not be the only thing that left here in a bag.

Hmm. That metaphor didn’t make a whole lot of sense.

We stopped in front of a huge metal door imprinted with the Seapony Energy logo—a curiously happy bearded seapony wielding a trident who was superimposed over a wireframe globe. “Hey, open

up,” Commander Rumcake shouted at the little intercom next to the door.

It looked like there used to be a number pad below it, but it had either been broken or fallen off on its own accord. “What’s the password?” came a muted mareish voice through the door, as opposed to the seemingly fine intercom I was staring at.

“Don’t do this to me right now.”

“See, you got part of it right, but the rest is wrong.”

“Seriously, open the door. You know it’s me. I was in there five minutes ago!”

“Okay, you got a different part of it right but you left out the first part.” Had I brought any reading material that I hadn’t finished yet?

“Junior Paladin French Fry, I will personally throw you into the radscorpion pit if you don’t open this door right now!” Commander Rumcake yelled, going as far as to punch the heavy door right where there were a small cluster of very coincidental dents.

It was some act of a goddess that these Rangers actually managed to function at all. “Junior Paladin, I am an Inquisitor of the Steel Rangers. Do you understand what that position is?” I calmly asked at the intercom.

There was silence from the other side of the door. Moments like these made me feel like all those years of bonebreaking work and effort were worth every second. This silence, this was pure gold to me. Muted shuffling of armored hooves were quickly accompanied by a loud groan and creak of distressed joints of the door in our way.

A smaller Steel Ranger, presumably the Junior Paladin French Fry by her bashful shuffle, slowly crept forward to greet us as the metal door finally clanked open. “Sorry for the wait, Inquisitor. Heh, my bad. It’s a thing that—”

“Don’t want to hear it,” I snapped, impatiently pushing past her. “A few days in the brig will sort you out just fine.”

Commander Rumcake galloped up past me to take the lead. “We don’t have a brig, sir.”

Oh. Unusual, but not a huge problem. “Well, what’s the next best thing you’ve got? No mistake can go unpunished.”

“The kitchens, sir. Knight Sergeant Sloppy Joe makes an exceptional rectally-ravaging chili. You do not want to be on that cleanup crew.” The Commander waved his hoof across his nose. “In

either point in time, mind you.”

This wasn't an essential part of my trip here, so that would have to do. “I'll trust your judgement, Paladin Commander. Take me to the Elder, would you?” Time to see whether the information was worth my time. In hindsight, I should have waited for the alleged radio broadcast *before* I made my move...

“Lemme give you the quick tour.” Commander Rumcake tromped down several flights of stairs, me following, down to another heavy door. A quick shove and crank later, we were in the base proper.

As far as underground bunkers went, this was nothing out of standard fare. Here we had the drab concrete facade, steel supports running up the walls in a structurally secure arch-ish design, and the indestructible industrial-grade magical lamp mounted every other wall bracket. The only real difference was the Seapony Energy logo pasted on the wall every few sections.

“Scribes' quarters down those stairs,” Commander Rumcake pointed out, passing a sealed door to our right then to the left. “That one goes to the library. No stairs, just a boring room full of terminals and books. You'll usually find Head Scribe Chile con Queso doing his thing in there most of the time with one of our resident High Scribes.”

Two robed mares, one tall and the other short, passed ahead of us so suddenly we almost ran into them, so engaged in their conversation that they didn't notice us at first. “...ay that we're taking over or something. Do we even have enough raw power to do—Oh, hey there, Rumcake. Who's the—” Both of them caught sight of me or my Inquisitorial cap and immediately saluted.

Typical Scribes. At least they had some respect.

“Hail, Inquisitor!” they both chanted at once.

The smaller one was a few shades of orange, broken up with a white stripe in her mane. She had bright little eyes that hungered for knowledge—probably a new recruit. The larger mare was mostly yellow, hints of green mane neatly tucked into the back of her hood. A Senior Scribe, by the looks of her robe.

“Yes, yes. Carry on,” I grunted, giving them a dismissive wave. They carried on with their conversation, with the addition of the questioning of my presence.

“Cafeteria down that way. A few Ranger barracks past that,” Commander Rumcake added, quickly passing a junction. “Anyway, yeah, Chile con Queso is sort of new. Elder Pizza Rolls poached him off another contingent or something. Granted, I've never seen the archives so neat or organized, so that's okay I guess.”

I mentally took note of that too. It wasn't unusual for contingents to exchange personnel or intelligence, but the way that the Paladin Commander had worded it had me somewhat suspicious. Maybe my Inquisitorial senses were over analyzing, but the things I was keeping track of were starting to pile up dangerously into line.

Hold on a second—when did he have the time to don a helmet? No matter.

“Say, Commander, what are your thoughts on your Elder’s preachings?” I asked, taking a left down a similar hallway right behind Paladin Commander Rumcake. All these tunnels and branches looked exactly the same, which made keeping track of where I was going very difficult. I was more busy lining up all the information I had to compile into an accusation if the time came.

Be prepared, I told myself.

From the unhappy groan that came out of the Commander’s helmet, it was easy to tell he didn’t really agree. “It’s all a bu—” He stopped and peeked over his shoulder at me. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Granted.”

Commander Rumcake carefully regarded me for a moment through those impassive lenses. “Permission to speak freely without consequence?” he asked more carefully.

So it was like that, was it? “You drive a hard bargain, Commander. Go ahead,” I joked, giving him a slight nod.

“Elder Pizza Rolls is going senile. That’s got to be it.” Commander Rumcake sighed, following the tunnel right. “Armory in there.” He offhooftedly pointed out as we trotted past a large locked door. “One day he up and decides that we should be helping the wastelanders, as opposed to letting them deal with each other. First thing that goes is our one working water talisman.”

Those were rare, which usually meant that it should have stayed in Steel Rangers custody where it would have been safe. Simply giving one away was a huge deal, especially if it was to some dirty wastelanders. Wait, did he just say *only* water talisman?

“I’m more concerned that you no longer have a water talisman,” I furiously snapped. “This is a major issue that puts the safety of your Rangers in jeopardy. Did you not even try talk some sense into the Elder?”

Rumcake stopped and turned around to face me head-on. “What did you think I did? Of course I tried! He kept saying that others needed it more than we did.” He tilted his helmet back and snorted. “I even tried talking to the senior staff, but the only one who would be willing to speak out against him is

the Head Knight. The Head Paladin won't even consider anything else because she trusts in the Elder's guidance even if she doesn't believe in it herself."

We eventually stopped in front of an identical metal door after passing more barracks, recreational areas, workshops, and other miscellaneous rooms I had already stopped caring about. It was time to go confront an Elder about his questionable change in decisionmaking.

"Elder's room, sir. Would you like me to introduce you to him?"

By "introduce" he probably meant "sit around and make sure the Elder's safety was enforced". I knew stealthy suggestions when he tried to make them—something I'd learned to do ages ago. At the moment, I had better plans that simply leaving the good Commander outside on his own.

"Fetch me the Head Paladin, Head Knight, and Head Scribe. They may want to be present... in case," I ordered with a slight sneer. "If they are indisposed, make sure to emphasize that their schedules have suddenly freed up."

Without another word, I let Commander Rumcake do his job and made sure to flourish my coat as much as possible on the way into the Elder's quarters. "Elder Pizza Rolls, I've heard much about you," I loudly proclaimed, head held high and cap dramatically pulled low over my eyes.

No response.

I pushed my cap back up so I could actually see. Nothing special in the manner of quarters—a cot in the corner, a desk piled with scrolls, books, a terminal, and empty bottles right beside it. A mural of the Steel Rangers logo decorated the wall behind the desk, covering up the former owner's bizarre art. The room was also large enough to have a throw rug, but it was so faded and threadbare that the original design was nearly unrecognizable. Long story short, I just dramatically entered an empty room.

The door squeaked open behind me and I quickly whirled around for my introduction. "Elder Pizza R—" I began, only to stop in mid-sentence.

A very confused Head Paladin stood in the doorway. "You're a bloody showboat, you know that?" she grumbled, promptly taking a few steps to the right and immediately sitting down on the spot. "Got your nose so far up in the air I coulda sworn you were Enclave scum."

"Watch your tone, *Paladin*," I warned in an aggravated manner.

The Head Paladin took a moment to respond—probably too busy rolling her eyes rather than where you got it, "Good luck trying to find somepony that'll actually run this failboat. I'll be back up to Head Paladin in a week if you demote me, so don't even try." I liked this one's confidence, even if her arrogance was a bit stronger than necessary.

A hooded head poked into the room and looked around. “*Sí, soy aquí. Ay, hola Señor. Me llamo Chile con Queso, el dirigente de las escribas de esta sede.*” This was the Head Scribe I’d heard about earlier—Chile con Queso. Definitely not a native, since I understood absolutely nothing, except the word “soy”. He casually waved at me with bright yellow hoof. An equally bright yellow beard and presumably short-cropped mane lived under his hood, giving me the odd impression of a wrapped cheddar biscuit. He offered his raised hoof to me to bump.

I grudgingly returned the gesture. “I didn’t understand any of that. Do you speak basic Equestrian?” The last thing I really needed to add to my list of problems at the moment was an impassible language barrier.

Chile vigorously nodded. “*Sí, sí, I speak enough.*” Wonderful, although he didn’t appear to have the lisp-like sound in proper Equestrian.

From the sounds of his broken Equestrian, I realized that the Head Scribe wasn’t native to the region and most likely not part of the original contingent, since a notable number of this chapter’s other Rangers spoke with what I could assume to be Trottingham accents. Multiple Steel Rangers with accents from Trottingham weren’t a coincidence—they were all probably from that general region before they were transferred to this damned wasteland.

However, the guest of honor was still nowhere to be found. “Does anypony know where the Elder is?” I asked the other two Rangers, who both shrugged.

Most of the time, Elders kept P.A. system controls in their rooms or a short-wave radio to call their subordinates without having to actually go anywhere. Unfortunately it seemed like Elder Pizza Rolls either didn’t use this method or he had given his away, wildly inferring from his previous actions. If I sent one of these two to go find him, then the Elder would most definitely come back while the other was out.

The door opened again, but I didn’t bother to attempt another dramatic introduction lest I look even more silly in front of the two Heads here. Good thing too, since it looked like the Head Knight had just shown up. No helmet, just like the Paladin Commander, but it was only barely acceptable because we were in base.

“What’s all this then?” the muddy yellow stallion grumbled, giving me a once-over. “An Inquisitor. Great. It’s a good thing I just polished my armor, then.”

Well look at it sparkle and shine. “Yeah. Too bad your mane is nowhere near regulation length,” I snapped, pointing out his nearly shoulder-length salt-and-pepper mane. That was a snag hazard, fire hazard, and fashion hazard.

The Head Knight's eyes darted back and forth, searching for an excuse. "I've been busy?" he weakly replied.

"So you aren't sure if you've been busy," I flatly shot back.

"Maybe?"

I facehoofed. "How did you even make it to where you are today?"

"With great difficulty." The Head Knight nodded sagely.

And then it occurred to me that I'd forgotten my manners after my initial failure of an introduction. "Names. The two of you," I ordered, pointing at the Head Paladin and the Head Knight.

Both of them smartly saluted. "I'm Head Paladin Chocolate Chip."

"And I am Head Knight Banana Pudding, at your service." The Head Knight bowed.

With that out of the way, it was time to play the waiting game. Perhaps the good Commander would be obliging to the idea of performing more tasks below his rank. It was too late now, but I should have considered the option that the Elder would be somewhere other than his living quarters at the exact moment I showed up. Damn you, hindsight.

Thankfully, the wait wasn't too long. A few minutes later, Elder Pizza Rolls himself backed into the room, tugging a strongbox in after him. He dragged it just in past the door and immediately plopped down where he stood.

First, he noticed Head Scribe Chile sitting there with a stupid grin on his face. "Oh, hello. Did you need some assistance with the cataloguing? It's a bit hectic down there but I'm sure I could probably help you with it."

"*Ahí viene el Mayor, y tiene un...* You, eh, have guest, Elder," Chile stuttered in broken Equestrian. "*Is muy importante.*"

A pair of tiny spectacles were swiftly mounted to Elder Pizza Rolls' nose. "Oh. Banana Pudding, Chocolate Chip, what's the matter?" he asked, a hint of worry in his elderly quavering voice.

I loudly cleared my throat behind him to get his attention.

The Elder quickly whipped around in fright. "Oh! I didn't see you there. Dear me, my heart can't take any more surprises today." He held out a hoof, which I shook for form's sake. "What brings you out here, Inquisitor?"

“Wild accusations of disruption and conflict, my dear Elder,” I drawled, idly dusting off my cap. “I’m here to see if any of them hold merit and whether your Steel Rangers are up to par.”

Elder Pizza Rolls frowned. “And where did you hear of these tales?”

I tapped my earbloom and smirked. “Word spreads quickly, Elder.”

“Ah. You’ve been listening, have you? And what do you think about my messages?” Elder Pizza Rolls asked.

It would have really helped if I had actually listened to one of his broadcasts. “I only managed to catch a few words here and there. Why don’t you enlighten me on your entire message, could you? I’m ever so curious,” I replied, as saccharine as I could muster.

“Of course.”

Head Paladin Chocolate Chip coughed. “So why the hay are we here, exactly?”

“In case I have further inquiries,” I simply responded.

Elder Pizza Rolls wasted no time. With great importance, he trumpeted, “For too long we’ve sat idly in our fortresses of solitude, hoarding old world technology while other unfortunate souls waste away. We have knowledge, we have the technology, we have the weapons. Why not use our material might for the betterment of others? Where does your loyalty lie—to the greater good? Or to the selfish doctrines that we’ve mindlessly followed without question?”

Huh. “So you plan to save the wasteland, one pony at a time?” I asked, mentally adding that to my list.

“I trust in the Elder’s guidance,” Head Paladin Chocolate Chip interjected.

I shot her a death glare. “I wasn’t asking. Twenty push ups, right now.”

Her jaw dropped. “What? You can’t be—”

“Thirty.”

“Elder? You can’t possibly let him do this to me!”

Elder Pizza Rolls shrugged. “He’s his own branch of command, technically. Anything he says has the same authority as anything I say.”

“*Thirty*,” I smugly repeated.

Armor loudly clanked and creaked as the Head Paladin began her sudden exercise regime. She muttered something under her breath, drowned out by her own movements.

“Anyway, so that’s why you gave away your water talisman?” I queried, beginning at the top of my priorities list. “I’m not sure whether you know this or not, but water talismans aren’t all too common around here.”

“And I’m aware about it. However, there is a water filtration system built into this facility that we’ve managed to restore into working order,” the Elder calmly replied.

I turned to Head Scribe Chile. “That true?”

The pony in question shrugged. “*Sí*. Is okay. Is worked on.”

“Which is to say?”

“Is... eh.” He shrugged again.

Which meant that it really wasn’t working. “On a side note, what caused you to acquire a new Head Scribe? Did your last one not perform to expectations?” Again, not unheard of.

“Our last Head Scribe, Buttered Biscuit, was caught trying to sabotage our operations to remove the water talisman from its former containment vessel. I had him exiled shortly thereafter for going against my orders. I put out a word to a good friend for assistance, and that’s where Chile con Queso comes in.”

I’d heard enough. “Elder, do you really understand what our creed is really about? Do you truly understand why we exist?” I asked in smooth tones, masking my rage.

He didn’t reply. Neither did anypony else, especially with Head Paladin Chocolate Chip only seventeen pushups in. Head Scribe Chile still had that stupid oblivious grin on his face, and Head Knight Banana Pudding only ambiguously nodded. Either no pony knew, or no pony was willing to pipe up because of my rank and the Head Paladin’s more recent punishment.

“Do you really think that those degenerate dirt-munchers really understand how powerful a water talisman can be in these times? They’ll fight and squabble over it, which will only bring about their own destruction. We exist to save the Wasteland from itself. We continue to collect old-world technology to keep it from forces that would wish to use their power for destruction. How do you save a world made of ash when that is all that is left?” I snapped in my best inspirational voice. “Tell me,

Elder. What do you do when your methods leave you with nothing?"

"You are blinded by your devotion to the ways of old. There is no more threat of war! The war has come and gone, and we continue to follow doctrines that no longer hold any relevance. Let us do our work and create order once more. Applejack believed in the honesty o—"

"Don't you *dare* slander the name of our founder with your baseless lies!" I bellowed, forcing everypony in the room to wince. "She entrusted us with the duty of protecting the Equestrian people."

"And protect them we shall. We will rise from the depths of the earth and rebuild the glory of the old world!"

"Our job is to protect what is left of the Equestrian people from themselves. You've must have seen the work of Red Eye. You must have seen the blasphemous mutants that call themselves goddesses. You must have seen the bucking raiders on our doorstep! They cannot be trusted with weapons and technology that are too powerful for their own good or they will turn on each other and destroy whatever remains of our world. We are the last defense that Equestria has left, and by Celestia I will not have you undermine everything we stand for."

"You don't understand, Inquisitor!"

"Let me ask you something. How does giving away your only water talisman help your own Rangers? Sure, you've just brightened up some scavenger's day, but did you think of the consequences?" I snarled, pointing at Head Scribe Chile. "That sack of potatoes can't even get a water filter working."

"May I add something?" Head Knight Banana Pudding asked.

I was temporarily out of material, so I let him have a word in. "Go ahead."

"Elder, the filter won't do anything about the radiation in the water table." Head Knight Banana pointed out. "Even with the overdrive we put on that talisman before it got taken out, that's not enough pure water for a month. With all due respect, you're an idiot. We sort of needed that talisman."

"*Este es cierto.* Is true."

"Thank you for your input, Spicy Cheese."

"You're welcome." The Head Scribe bowed, as if he'd actually done us a great service.

That was all the fodder I needed. "You are disillusioned with dreams of grandeur, and you didn't think of the consequences of your actions. Where will your crusade be when you've killed off all

your Rangers from your own incompetence?”

“B-but, I...” Elder Pizza Rolls stammered, frantically grasping at straws. “I only wanted to help...”

I sighed, mentally preparing myself for the hard part. “Elder Pizza Rolls, you are under arrest for harboring sympathies with the enemy, misallocation of resources, and undermining the integrity of the Steel Rangers. Anything you say from this point on will be grounds for execution. You are entitled to your basic rights, but no further.”

“Not like this. Not like this!” His eyes darted back and forth. “I’ve had enough of his snide insinuations. Chocolate Chip, get the Inquisitor out of here!” There it was—his last effort.

There must have been abject terror under that helmet, since Head Paladin Chocolate Chip didn’t even try to take a step toward me. “Go ahead, arrest me. Try me,” I goaded.

“I’m gonna have to pass on this one, Elder,” she whimpered, taking a step back.

“Banana Pudding?”

“Nuh-uh. You’re on your own.”

“Chile con Queso?” The Elder looked around in desperation.

The Head Scribe was just gone. Probably at some point after his helpful interjection he’d slipped out before the fight had escalated.

I allowed myself a relieved chuckle. “Elder Pizza Rolls, you have defied a direct order from a servant of the Circle of Steel. Last chance—come quietly and maybe you’ll slip away with just exile to the wastes.”

“You can’t do this!” Elder Pizza Rolls scrambled for his desk and began to fumble through drawers...

This was it. “Oh, but I can. I am the authority of the Inquisition. And I will uphold the name of the Steel Rangers.” I loosened my coat in anticipation of what was most likely about to happen.

He defiantly drew himself up, pistol in mouth, and pointed it at my face. Unfortunately for him, I had the faster draw. In the time it took for him to find his gun and bring it to bear, a small compartment on my inner left foreleg sprung open and my standard-issue Inquisitorial pistol flew out of her holster. She was a cute little revolver, only packing five .38 rounds. Her body was painted a matte black, and wispy gold highlights danced all over her frame and barrel. The grip had my favorite

decoration—the Circle of Steel logo, embossed with swirling mother-of-pearl. I called her “Complaints Department”.

The Elder had enough time to be somewhat surprised about the barrel of my pistol pressed up against his forehead before I summarily executed him right on the spot without further ado. The pistol in his mouth clattered to the ground and he crumpled to the ground in a heap. The two other Rangers in the room were obviously taken by surprise, so I let them recover while I returned Complaints Department back to her holster.

“Well, that complicates things,” Head Paladin Chocolate Chip muttered under her breath.

“Not particularly.” I took note of the large blood spatter marring the mural of the Steel Rangers logo and vaguely motioned at it. “Be a good little Paladin and clean that off, would you?”

“Well, Inquisitor, you’ve gone and shot the Elder. What do you want me to tell the boys? Chocolate Chip is in charge now?” Head Knight Banana Pudding asked, also giving the Head Paladin a gentle push. “You heard the Inquisitor. Go on, grab a mop and get to work.”

I still needed to find out how far the former Elder’s mistaken thoughts reached into my Steel Rangers. “My investigation here hasn’t ended just yet. I’ll take command until your soldiers are restored to their former glory.” Head Knight Banana Pudding opened his mouth, then closed it.

Note to self, interrogate the Head Scribe to see what he knows. Actually, even better...

“Do either of you know where the Head Scribe has gone off to?” Both ponies shook their heads. Time to do this the hard way, then. “Find him if he’s alive. If not, kill him. He knows something, I’m sure of it.”

The Head Paladin scooted into the room, shamefully toting a mop and bucket behind her. Without further ceremony, she dunked the cleaning implement into the murky water and began to try and scrub the blood off of the Steel Rangers mural on the wall. It was particularly entertaining to watch her try and scoot the corpse of the late Elder out of the way so she could continue work.

Back to the matter at hoof. It was all a huge hunch, banking on the fact that the Elder was tricked into accepting the lies brought by an unfamiliar scribe. Of course, this was also assuming he was trying to hide from me as opposed to him have gotten bored and left. Head Knight Banana Pudding seemed to support the codices, as did Paladin Commander Rumcake. Head Paladin Chocolate Chip might be a problem, as she’d seemed to support the Elder’s decisions until I intimidated her into submission.

Head Knight Banana Pudding was about to step outside when he abruptly paused. “Hold on a sec. Not to question your orders, but are you sure about that?”

“Find him if he’s alive—”

“—if not, kill him,” he finished. “You see a problem, sir?”

I groaned and facehoofed. “You know what I mean, Knight.”

“So by kill, do you mean...?”

On second thought, killing him wouldn’t really accomplish anything if he was guilty. “Ugh. You know what, just find him. If he runs, shoot to disable and then detain his ass.”

“Just his ass, sir?”

There was a fleeting moment where I was inexorably tempted to also summarily execute Banana Pudding on the spot for mouthing back at me. “It would be unfortunate if you met the same fate as your late Elder, now wouldn’t it?” I joked with as little humor in my voice as possible.

That got him into action. “Alright, alright, I got it. I’ll get my Knights on it.” Head Knight Banana Pudding immediately vacated the premises, yelling for one of his Sergeants. Annoyingly enough, the blood leaking from the back of the late Elder’s head was beginning to stain the throw rug behind the desk—a rug, in fact, that I had arbitrarily decided to take a liking to.

“Head Paladin Chocolate Chip.” She paused in mid-scrub to shoot me a baleful glare. “I trust your judgement, so I’ll leave the specifics of the operation up to your discretion. Retrieve the water talisman at any costs necessary. Do *not* disappoint me.”

Irradiate

By Fallingsnow

“Where are we going mama?”

The only question I’d heard in the last half hour. The filly across the room kept asking while the group of us scurried through the tunnels. All the fillies and colts kept asking that. The roar above us told the older ones everything they needed to know.

The zebras had finally done it. They’d killed us all.

“Shush, Sweet Pea... we’re going on a vacation.” The hushed voice of her comforting mother carried, much louder than she must have meant.

“It stinks down here mama.”

“I know Sweetie... I know.”

The mare at the head of the herd, Tranquility, worked for Stable-Tec. She had worked on the Stable they’d built beneath town. She knew where it was. She knew how to get in. She knew how to save us.

Her singsong voice, her accent from somewhere else, Trottingham most likely, rang through the stinking sewers. “It’s just up ahead. Keep up.”

Another deep rumble as another weapon of death hit our home above. Every second, more were dying. Burnt alive by the wall of fire we’d fled.

“Enough food and water for hundreds, and plenty of room left. Tickets only went out yesterday, I’m sure they’ll let us in without.”

There was the catch. We were betting our lives on the kindness of ponies whose job it was to close a door in exactly this situation. If they hadn’t closed the door, we could get in. Live our lives. Love. Have children. Die of old age, safe in our beds.

Fucking stripes stole that from us. The Stable would let us steal it back.

We’d followed her down into the sewers, heading for what she had promised was safety. Sanctuary from the hell that was the surface.

“No... NO!”

She had rounded the corner first, and the rest of us soon joined her in her dismay.

A huge metal door. Meant to be sealed for two hundred years. Completely impenetrable. Completely fucking us.

Tranquility pounded a hoof on the door, joined quickly by others. A dozen ponies, pounding uselessly on the door. The echo of their banging briefly drowned out the roar of death from above.

“You! You brought us down here to die!” I don’t know who made the first accusation against Tranquility. I don’t think anypony ever found out. Others joined in with the accusations.

“We could have tried running, but now its too late!”

“We’re stuck down here in this fucking tomb, you stupid bitch!”

The crowd was getting angrier by the second. More and more accusations were screamed at the now cowering mare. The youngest of us had started crying as the adults collectively lost their shit.

I saw the first hoof thrown, connecting with Tranquility’s muzzle. A tooth bounced off of the Stable door. Then the crowd tore into her. I was too far back to take part, but I had to admit I would have thrown in some kicks.

Mob mentality drives us all a bit crazy.

I watched with grim satisfaction as the life was beaten out of a mare by her friends and neighbors. Eventually, she stopped crying. She lay in an expanding pool of blood as ponies backed away from her. Some were shocked at what they’d just done, wiping blood away. Others had manic looks, relishing that they’d gotten what little vengeance they desired as their world was burned. Most went off with their families, finding little corners and nooks to huddle and wait out the end.

Me, I had no family. I was an information officer for the Ministry of Image. Everything that had ever warranted containment or censorship was on fire up above. As of thirty minutes ago, my job was finished forever. I wasn’t expecting a pay check.

Fucking zebras had killed us, and Tranquility had put the last nail in our coffin.

Tranquility got what she deserved.

The first few months were tough. Learning. Adapting to survive in the world we’d been given.

Some families tried going back to the surface to find food or loved ones. We'd mounted expeditions at first, hoping for supplies or rescue. Surely somepony had survived up above. The cleanup crews had to come, to help us. To give us the all clear.

No pony ever came back.

Every once in a while I'd hear screams from distant tunnels. I knew what some ponies had turned to. They found the weak, the sick, and the alone. They put them down to feed their loved ones. There were different roaming bands of them, families that knew each other and stuck together.

I'd seen a few of those groups turn on each other. Children always died after their parents. Dragged off, never to grow up or have to deal with the hardships of tunnel life.

Me, I'd found a pipe and my own little hidey hole. There was a nice collection of mushrooms growing in there. They made me feel funny at first, but I'd gotten used to them.

Part of what the Ministry had taught me was subterfuge. Finding things that were hidden. It was a useful skill, being able to go where others wouldn't think to look.

It had been hard, killing my first. She'd been starved, gaunt and manic at the prospect of food. Her hair had been falling out across her whole body, and I'd taken time to wonder if that would happen to me. While her leg was still twitching after I'd crushed her skull, I wondered if the burning sensation that I felt in my skin and muscles was me dying as well.

I'd seen the signs in a bunch of others. Tightening skin, patches of hair missing, teeth falling out. I didn't know what it was. There had been a member of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences with us, but he'd been one of the first to wander off. I was sure he would have known what was happening to us. It was a weapon that was doing it. Up above, the fire. It was poisoning us.

If we didn't kill each other, I knew it would do the job for us eventually.

I'd see this through to the end.

I just wish I'd stop itching so much.

Tranquility got off easy.

Years. I lost track of how many.

I'd lost track of ponies too. I try to remember what we used to look like, but it gets harder every day.

Keep losing tracks.

Scabs. That word worked. We all looked like scabs.

I knew what to look for. Most had lost the light in their eyes. Dead gazes.

Intelligence. It went away.

They ignored us.

The smart ones. Like me. We were the rare survivors. Some could talk.

My tongue fell out.

We ate what we could. Scabs. Mushrooms. Rats.

Each other. If needed.

This was life now. I was on my twenty third pipe. The others broke.

I think.

Ponies from above came down. They didn't last long. Eaten. Turned. They all stayed in the end.

Tranquility still there. Laying there. Undisturbed. Bones.

She brought us here.

Bitch.

Door noise.

We gather. We many.

Tranquility. Bones move. Not move long time.

Door open.

Light. Sound. Moving.

Ponies inside. Fresh. Not scab.

Finally.

Inside Stable.

Water.

Shelter.

Screaming.

Food.

Tranquility.

Thank you.

Jelly

By CaptainHoers

There was a soft splash. Much quieter than you'd expect from a fall that high. In fact it was more of a wet slap into liquid. The surface tension took considerable force to break, and the impact winded her. Shooting Stars wanted to scream. She'd just fallen twenty feet in the dark from a rusty catwalk into something cold and wet and she didn't want to know what it was. Before she could process it, she was already fully submerged, and it was getting everywhere. It seeped into her eyes, into the gashes and gouges from her fall, and she gulped it down and inhaled it in her panic to find air. She knew she was as good as dead.

She cursed her stupidity as she waited for death to come. She should have known better than to take up this offer. Go get this doodad from Saddlefield, they said. Pre-war arcane waste treatment facilities aren't that dangerous, they said. When she'd heard that even Atom Smasher had turned the job down, she should have known the notion was indescribably insane. Patently suicidal. But then her new travelling companions just had to get the idea that this was reasonable.

She felt the pressure drop on her back. She was at the surface. Of course - whatever it was, it must have been denser than flesh, and her robes weren't caught on bits of falling catwalk, so she floated. She rotated herself back so her head was free, and began to tread water.

Her eyes felt like they were full of nettles, but she kept them open anyway. Zephyr Rush hovered a short way away, only visible by a little red emergency light above a nearby doorway. Stars went to say something, but she first had to cough up the fluid in her lungs and battle the delirium of oxygen deprivation. Zephyr continued to hover a safe distance away.

Eventually Stars managed to gurgle something audible above her own thrashing. "*Help me, you fuck!*"

"Uhm..." was the only thing that made it out of Zephyr's stupid mouth.

The metal door below the red light flew off its hinges. Zephyr narrowly avoided it, and shot at the doorway a couple of times. Stars didn't duck, because she figured getting decked in the face by a sub-sonic metal door and dying instantly was preferable to drowning in industrial runoff. To her chagrin, it made a dent in the vat and carried on past it.

"Put those things down, birdbrain! There's just us here." Zephyr made a noise like an injured puppy and dropped to the platform by the door at Peach Liqueur's scolding. At least that was probably what Peach said, because her northern accent was so thick that even Stars had trouble understanding her sometimes. For your benefit and my sanity, the accent has not been transcribed. Though for the sake of

immersion, when reading Peach's dialogue, ignore every consonant that doesn't require you to close your lips or teeth, and stretch the shape of each vowel until it mildly aches to do so.

Tongueslix, still wary of these personal fire-powered catapults, took a moment to step in after Peach. He'd managed to figure out a light spell, which was an infinite improvement of his utility. Peach brought a ladder from somewhere outside, and Canary held on to it, because that was helping. He was sure of it.

Stars flipped a coin in her head, and it turned up tails, so she reluctantly decided to keep on living. She swam to the end of the ladder that had been lowered to the edge of the vat and she crawled on to it. Her body felt heavy coming out of the liquid. She stopped climbing, like she was having a sudden change of heart about the path of self-preservation. The others used the one brain cell they had between them and pulled the ladder up.

Once the ladder was up, Stars sprawled on the platform by the door, and coughed and hacked to get the rest of the fluid out of her system. Everyone else kept a good ten feet away. Canary didn't do this by choice, he had to be pulled back and slapped on the nose for trying to go up to Stars and lick her.

"What..." Not quite there. Another cough or two, and she had everything out. "Why are all you idiots just standing there? No towels? Not even an 'are you okay?'"

Tongueslix grimaced. "I'm not quite sure how to put this." Canary jumped at Peach's leg, and she slapped his nose again. She muttered something about retarded wild children.

"The wordmancer struck dumb? Oh this is rich. What's the problem?"

Zephyr lowered a little to get a better look at Stars. "I think the problem is that you need some ice cream and a spoon."

"What?"

"Take... take a look at yourself."

She looked down. The light from Tongueslix's spell wasn't great, but it was enough to spot the dancing colours on the liquid dripping off her. She gulped. She knew of two things in liquid form that looked like rainbows, and only one of them was likely to be in a hazard factory like Saddlefield. She pulled her foreleg over to look at it. It took her a minute to figure out where it was, because it certainly didn't look like it did five minutes ago. It was still a greyish lavender, but now it was also glossy, translucent, and wobbled.

Tongueslix squealed when Stars levitated the vanity mirror from his breast pocket. He tried to play it off coolly, smoothing down his cravat and combing back his mane again. Being the more competent

mage, Stars was able to hold the mirror and provide more light than the other unicorn at the same time. She gawped as she took in her reflection. She ignored the liquid still running off her. Of more urgent notice was the see-through nature of her head. She reluctantly tilted it. Her mane was still attached, but it had congealed into six thick strands around the front, and a solid mass at the back with her two plaits sticking out. Her ears responded to movement, but when she closed her eyes, it made no difference. Her eyelids were too thin to block any light.

"Well, it coulda been worse, going for a taint bath..." Zephyr's cracked, nonchalant tones were the last thing Stars wanted to hear about now. It was a heroic feat of willpower not to smash the mirror and jam it into her eyes. Instead she shoved it back in Tongueslix's general direction. It smeared on his nose. He spent the next minute wiping it clean, and the minute after that admiring himself in it, and lamenting what this foul wasteland was doing to his complexion and coiffure.

"Then why don't *you* take a dip?"

"Stars, I know it's a bit of a shock, but- *AY*." Peach slapped Canary on the nose again and whistled. He yelped, and lay on the floor to brood. Tongueslix stared.

"I'm just saying, you're really lucky to be alive right now. Stuff is nasty."

"I guess you're right... I..." Stars took a deep breath. "I need a minute."

Zephyr frowned and looked around. "I don't think we have a minute. This place is just waiting to collapse, and from what I've heard, vats of taint are pretty low on the danger rating here."

Stars shuddered. "Look, maybe we should just turn back. It's too dangerous. We all got half a lethal dose of radiation in the courtyard on the way in, if we hurry we should be able to make it out with just under the whole dose." She knew that wasn't how radiation worked, but Zephyr hadn't exactly shown herself to be an expert in balefire physics either, and she was a wasteland genius next to the rest of the party.

"No, we can't." That's exactly what she was afraid of. "We have to finish this job. I mean, how would the Steel Rangers feel about a breach of contract like that?"

"We don't make contracts, usually. We're self-sufficient. Maybe it's because my brain is now made of dessert, but I can't really remember why I went on this one with you."

Zephyr inspected her hooves, and then the barrels of her guns. "You sign on the dotted line, you do what you're paid for. Simple as that."

"If I'm dead, it doesn't make a difference whether I get paid, does it?"

"Easy for you to say, you can just run back to your buddies in Warry Tow-"

"Warreington."

"... and you get food and shelter for doing whatever the hell it is you do in there. If I don't get paid, I might as well be dead."

Stars grumbled, then sighed. "Fine then. You lot can go and die horribly in this industrial death trap, I'm out of here."

"You can't!" Was that panic in Zephyr's voice? "We need you!"

On any other day, this would be the part where Stars cocked a smug grin and thought something like, I told you so, or how the mighty have fallen. However, on any other day, she probably would not have been made entirely out of gelatin. "No. Fuck off. If I stay with you guys, Canary will probably try to eat me." He perked up his ears at the mention of his name and dragged at the floor with his forehooves. Stars stood up and started walking away, still dripping taint after her.

"No! Wait!" Zephyr flew in front of her and tried to physically stop her from leaving. Only on the squelch of unprotected forehooves on taint-smearred jelly did she realise what she'd done. The urgent grimace on her face remained, but her gaze shifted from Stars' eyes to the point of contact. Stars remained blank and looked down. Zephyr slowly pulled her hooves away. The ends of her hooves were no longer the same pale gold as the rest of her. Instead, they were now white, cold, and starting to drip. Her jaw hung slack as she brought them up to her face to inspect them.

Stars allowed herself a smile. "Now we just need a spoon."

Zephyr took a deep breath and winced. A lump of hoof slid off her leg like melting ice cream and left a white splat on the floor. It smelled faintly of sugar and vanilla. "Y-yeah... let's get out of here."

Karus

By Delvius

"How far will you go for Roam?"

Stay in formation.

That's what we were told to do, what we were trained to do, each and every day of our 25-year service. Whether we were on the attack or on the defensive, mounting fortifications or charging the front, we held formation. It was paramount, it was a symbol of discipline and zeal. It made us Roamans, and Roamans brought with them the ideals of a perfect society wherever they went -- not a perfect society based on the standards of equitarianism, nor of socialism or capitalism. Ours was a society where each and every able-bodied person took up arms against their enemies. We discussed, we talked, we negotiated, yes; the truth was, though, that diplomacy was only a tool meant to delay conflict. Conflict was inevitable, even with the closest of friends. It always was. It always will be.

So what did we bring with us, then? Notions of duty, sacrifice, honor, ambition, that's what. To the frozen north or the scorching south; in fact, to both. We laid the foundations for the world, and it does right to bend heel to us. Yet some people rebel. Yet some people resist what cannot be resisted:

Conflict.

***** Roama Victrix *****

Those were the words my father taught me. And they were also the words his father taught him. Of course both of them were soldiers, so such talk was expected. And they were more than just soldiers; they were Roaman legionaries, the finest troops in the world. And I, Thanus Meridius Decimus, was one such soldier. And even better: I was a legate, a commander of several thousand of such troops.

Now, soldiers marched on their own feet. But as a legate I had a privilege. I had a mount.

"Legatus, sir!" the zebra centurion gasped, galloping up to my cerati -- an animal of robust make, plated in thick hide that did well as armor and was also a beast of reliability. That's not to say its smell benefited from its kind's many good qualities. "The cohorts are delayed by the terrain, and the rising sun is beating down on the soldiers. Shall I call for a halt first?" he asked, gasping. I looked over at him, eyeing his details carefully. Ah, a centurion of the 10th cohort, the last in the column. He must have galloped very far and very fast.

"Make it so, then," I replied. Legionaries, like any other living thing, needed rest. As a commander I had to be astutely aware of that reality, not get lost in my authority. For what can a soldier do who charges when out of breath? "But keep the legion in formation. Don't compromise the column. Tell the primus pilus this."

"Yes sir!" And so he galloped off, fast as his struggling heart and gasping lungs could take him. As he went I checked the 10th cohort's centurionate for his name. He was Arcadius Velerius. Taking note of his resolve to gallop -- well, it must have been a little over a half-kilometer from the 10th cohort to where I was -- I decided to prioritize him for a pay raise. Money did wonders in strengthening an individual's resolve.

With the primus pilus' orders, the legion stopped. And at my further instructions, we made no camp -- we were close enough to our destination for us to go without. But for the sake of formalities, I let the

praetorians get to constructing my tent. I entered it even as the cohorts rested on the blasted concrete road. I sat down on the small chair inside, and laid back, relaxing for a while.

Now, as nothing happened in the half-hour or so I rested, I will give you some context. I am Thanus Meridius Decimus, legate of Legion IV Valere Victrix Equestris. I am of the Imperial Roaman Legion, the surviving military branch of the Roaman Empire's military that survived in an underground shelter beneath the Forum. Large enough to house many thousands of inhabitants, *Roama* fittingly became our underground capital. Yet even its size and wealth could not contain us forever. That is why the Legion left for the blasted, wastelandic surface. We were meant to reconquer Roam, to restore it. Such was our destiny.

Now, the surface became a wasteland 200 years ago, when the Imperial Roaman Government came to balefire blows with the Equestrian government. Our lands were annihilated, our peoples burned to ash. But some of us survived, and that was us. The Legion. And so it was our mission to go out to the wasteland and knock on the doors of our far-flung and isolated fellow survivors. Our goal, in particular, was the 50th of the Roaman Stables -- huge shelters, just like mine. This one was named Marediolanon.

Ah, but enough context. My praetorian tribune came to me and informed me of the legion's preparedness to continue. So I had them disassemble my tent, and we continued on. For a few more hours, and the sun beat down on us. Even I wasn't spared, though I wasted no energy on trotting. I couldn't imagine where the soldiers got their endurance -- surely the weight of all their gear weighed them down.

Ah, but I did know where they obtained the will to go on. It was there, gleaming in the morning sun, the gold of its shape seeming to be its own star.

The Roaman Aquila. The eagle standard, the heart and soul of a legion. The troops followed it because it was *karus*, Imperial for precious. They followed it, though it was at the head of the legion, because it was a symbol of what they fought for. Within its golden wings and head, in its talons and feathers, was engraved the ideals of Roaman civilization. They followed me, yes, as the leader of the 4th legion, but it was the eagle that kept them going. If it were lost... so were we.

They would die for it. They would go to hell and back for it. They would move the earth for it. And most of all, they would stay in formation for it. Because they were Roamans, and to them, it was *karus*: precious.

"There it is, legionaries!" I bellowed, nearly suffocating on the hot air. Gods, curse the Roaman province's mixed climate! "There's the mountain those damned Marediolanians are at... now, first cohort, move up!"

So they went. 500 zebras, all armed and armored, galloped up the slope. It was not very steep, but nonetheless the effort they exerted must have been substantial. Yet they did not tire, yet they did not falter or hesitate in their orders. They followed the aquilifer up that slope. And I followed as well. I don't know why I did; I could very well have stayed down the mountain, in my tent, and waited it all out. They had their orders, they knew what to do.

But perhaps my soul desired it. Perhaps my soul desired to follow what was precious to me. I wasn't needed up there, but *I* needed to be up there to be with it. The Aquila. And so my attention was fixed on it even as the siege engine busted into the heavy steel door that protected Marediolanon, and remained on it even as it started to yank... and yank... and yank...

"Door is almost down, sir!" a legionary yelled. "Get ready to have the eagle charge in!"

After a few more yanks the door was pulled down. Dust flew into the air. The first century's centurion and his own selected troops went in first. To our shock, there was a scuffle, and sounds of death. The

aquilifer almost charged in, but I halted him.

It wasn't until a few moments later that all resistance seemed pacified. It took a stun grenade and minigun fire to subdue it. But sparing what was precious to us from the risk of danger, I entered the steel walls of the 50th Stable. It was a mess, with blood trailing the floor and the stunned civil guard limp like corpses on the ground.

There was one pony there, in particular, that caught my attention. He was crimson-coated, though not by blood. I don't know why I looked at him with such interest. There was just something about him.

"Take one more step into Marediolanon and you're minced meat!" someone threatened. There was a guard, on a balcony of glass. He had a gun pointed to me as I entered. "Now identify, and prepare to pay reparations! Your operation is over."

I shook my head. "Oh, it's only just begun," I said. "For you see, my dear garrison... this copycat Equestrian Stable, this 'Marediolanon'... it belongs to us. And it always has. The blood unfortunately spilled today was a cause of your foolery and ignorance."

The pony looked over at me. I quickly glanced his way. There it was again, that... feeling. There was something about him, I couldn't tell what it was. I took a quick look back outside, and caught a glimpse of the eagle's glimmer. It seemed... felt like there was something in the eagle that was beckoning to the pony, almost as if it wished something to do with him...

"I said identify!" the guard barked back.

I directed my attention to the guard again, putting aside all other thoughts. "I am Thanus Meridius Decimus, legatus de legio IV Valere Victrix Equestrius," I replied calmly, with a smile. Then my smile tensed. "We are of the Imperial Roaman Legion. And your leader and I... we have much to discuss."

Loss

By SilverAura

Hi, I'm 7 years old, and my name is Junebug. My Mommy says a Junebug is some kind of insect in Equestria... but... I've never seen Equestria. You see, I was born in Stable 6 and nopony knows what Equestria looks like outside now. Mommy says it's been almost 10 years since the big door thingy closed. I don't know why the big door had to lock us in here, that was mean of it.

Mommy said she was from someplace called Manehattan before she entered the Stable. That place sounds really big, not like the Stable. Sometimes we talk about what Equestria was like before the big door closed in class. The teacher tells us that it was a beautiful place, with lots of peace. There are 14 of us in class when nopony is sick.

One of the older Colts in class said he thought it was a horrible place when he was 5. He was talking about some kind of big fight with the big ponies against stripey ponies called Zebras. What's a Zebra, are they funny looking with all those stripes on them? He got taken to the naughty room for saying that, he never left his room after that.

*** **

3 years later

I'm 10 now, I saw more of my friends get taken to the naughty room. We get told it's because they were making up bad stories. But how come we never see anypony come out again? I miss my friends, we can't play soccer with only 9 of us, somepony would be left out.

The teacher looked sad today, he looked like he lost someone he loved. When Marigold asked if he was ok he said his sister had to go to the naughty room. Why was he crying if she was just going to be gone for a day?

*** **

1 year later

I'm 11, but I don't think I'm happy about it. More of my friends were taken to the naughty room. My mommy was crying because my aunt was taken too. when I asked mommy why she was crying she just said to go play. There aren't many games to play now, there are only 5 of us in class now, the stable feels really empty now too.

There are lots of places to hide where nopony will find us for hide and seek, but the game still goes by really fast with so few of us. The teacher seems distant since his sister went to the naughty room. He made jokes when I was littler, now he always looks like he's trying to hide sadness.

*** **

6 months later

There are no games to play anymore outside our room, only me and my best friend are left in class now, everypony else was taken to the naughty room. I don't think they liked what I did either. The security guard said I had to go to the naughty room because I was encouraging my friend's story. I'm scared now because I don't know what's in the naughty room...

I have to go now. the security pony is here for me, mommy is crying and when I said I would be back tomorrow she just cried harder. I don't think I'm coming back...

L is for Loss.

Stable 6 Experiment Documentation:

Your stable is to act as though the war never happened, any talk to the contrary is to be silenced. To this end a specially equipped room has been provided where threats to these conditions may be silenced for good. Should the Stable population drop below acceptable levels the Stable is forfeit and all remaining ponies are to report to this room, henceforth called the "one way door".

The one way door is to be used on anypony who does not follow these guidelines. Should the Overmare choose to ignore these guidelines then they too shall be subject to the one way door and a new Overmare chosen.

Missing

By JustMoth

Logistics Officer Nall's personal log: Tuesday 10.11.81

First day on duty here at the Lenticularis base, and it appears to be a refreshingly effortless transition of power. The Logistician I replaced appears to have kept a tight ship and painstaking book keeping, so the usual chore of bringing the supply office up to regulation standards will not be necessary.

It's refreshing to see how differently things are handled at a top security outpost. Logistics is treated with the seriousness it deserves. Unlike certain Enclave postings I've been assigned to, where procedures are so slipshod that Class VI supplies were labeled Class IV. Then everypony was all surprised when the toothpaste they ordered wound up being industrial building clouds.

Only caveat to this surprisingly successful first day is that the keyboard on this workstation is short a letter key. I have already set in the necessary request paperwork for a new one, and I'll just have to work around it until it arrives.

Logistics Officer Nall's personal log: Wednesday 10.12.81

I guess I was wrong about the serious respect for logistics that this 'top security' outpost has. All day I've been pestered by ponies ordering all sorts of incidental odds and ends. Of course, barely any had the proper request papers.

It wasn't all the standard day by day things either, like practice rounds or foodstuffs, it was things that ponies don't often wear out or use up. Sets of battle shoes, spark batteries, cloud nails, even a wing preening kit.

Those kits are standard issue and sturdy enough to outlast the pegasus using it! There better be one pristine looking set of wings on this base to warrant a second kit.

The worst of the lot though are the scientists stationed here. They have no concept of the purpose of the logistics office and treat it like a convince store. The few that even gave the effort to filling out a requisition sheet filled the wrong ones. A neutron flow reversing engine is in no way a "standard personal article", that kind of hardware requires a 528.6215 Class Y request sheet!

During dinner I spoke with a captain about the large quantity of requests, and he said that it's higher than the usual need at this base. This theory is that several of the ponies stationed here could have been

holding off on filing requisition requests once they heard the previous Logistician was retiring. The stallion that held this position previously had a reputation for being a real stickler for procedure and ponies here figured his successor would give an easy pass on their requests.

If that is the case, then they are in for a rude awakening...

Logistics Officer Nall's personal log: Thursday 10.13.81

Events here at Lenticularis have taking a disturbing turn, literally overnight.

Even before dawn the logistics office was stuffed with a throng of frustrated pegasus, all insisting I replace whatever thing they were lacking and 'desperately needed'. Only part of the base that was overrun to a greater extent was the Enclave Police office.

It appears that during the night, hundreds of objects of all shapes and sizes went AWOL all across the base. The absentee articles spanned the likes of anti-tank rifles to tubes of zinc sunblock just disappeared under the noses of the enclave elite. One officer even reported that his pillow was taken while he was sleeping on it. This also is apparently the reason behind the spike in requests yesterday, yet then it was so subtle and gradual that nopony really thought anything of it.

This all appears to be a very elaborate (and largely pointless considering certain things that were taken) theft and the EP officers have their hooves full investigating it. All they can do for now is note down all that has gone absent and then send ponies to Logistics to request new ones.

To cope with this crisis I had to forgo any hope that the correct paperwork was filled out and just note down in short-hoof what was being requested by who and eventually fill out the proper papers later. Even with his crude approach, the base's stores of supplies began running low at a chaotically fast rate. To add insult to injury, the local scuttlebutt around the base is I could be the culprit, since I arrived around when things started to disappear. Lieutenant general Cloud Coral sent out a base wide notice dispelling this theory, pointing out how I have a flawless service record and the absurdity of a Logistician sabotaging the enclave in this way. Yet certain soldiers still give distrustful looks as I trot down the halls.

I just hope that the culprit is apprehended soon so I can get back to a trace of regular work here.

Logistics Officer Nall's personal log: Friday 10.14.81

Things continue to disappear around the base, and the situation has escalated severely.

After one of the scientists notice that his top secret research papers had been taken right out of his briefcase, the investigation into the lost property expanded beyond just apparent personal effects and sundry articles.

Whoever (or whatever) this thief is, they succeeded in extracting apparently arbitrary confidential files out of a locked filing cabinet, abscond with prototype weapons held in the weapons locker, and even took the classified contents of the base's vault. Yet the worst disappearance was the foalnapping of lieutenant general Sea Coral's teenage daughter.

While the lieutenant general was endeavoring to reign in the rising chaos of these disappearances, his daughter, who stopped by to visit, had slipped out of his office to use the lavatory and never returned. Apparently, her visits are a frequent enough occurrence that security turns a blind eye to it, even though this is supposed to be atop security facility. She wasn't even assigned escort guards and had free access to anywhere on the base that doesn't require security cards. So when she failed to return, half the outpost was turned upside-down again to find her.

What started off as a bizarre rash of petty thefts has now escalated into high treason, grand larceny, and abduction. In response, lieutenant general Sea Coral has put the base on total lockdown, preventing anypony entering or leaving until the culprits are apprehended.

I was planning to use this weekend for double checking the inventory of the base storehouse anyway, but there are several ponies on this base rather putout about not being able to leave.

Logistics Officer Nall's personal log: Saturday 10.15.81

The disappearances have gone beyond serious to the ridiculous. Things that are unfeasible to steal have vanished.

An entire Tortoise class air tank vanished out of its hangar. A soldier's bed was taken while he was sleeping in it. One of the base's scientists even reported that a whole laboratory is gone. The door just leads to open cloud now. Fortunately nopony was in it at the when it vanished, but that doesn't denote that all ponies are accounted for. Several high ranking scientists have not been seen since the lockdown started.

News got out that the security footage the Enclave police obtained of stuff disappearing is just raising additional questions. Apparently, things are there one second and then just gone in a blur the next. This is causing gossip and speculation to run wild all over the base.

There is talk that it's the result of a pre-war zebra super weapon, or that Discord has returned to spread chaos in the Enclave. One outlandish theory heard was that it's a spell cast by unicorn like creatures,

transfigured by the radiation, living in the wasteland below the clouds.

At least with everypony else so worked up about the disappearances, I've finally had a chance to do actual work. I succeeded in get the storehouse inventory tabulated and found a 17% deficit between the stock present and what is on record (probably due to the disappearances). I sent in the necessary paperwork to get nearly all of the absent stock replaced, all except the ones where the correct request papers have disappeared (which I've also sent in a request to replace).

Logistics Officer Nall's personal log: Sunday 10.16.81

The lockdown has finally been lifted and the puzzle of the disappearances has been solved!

The 'culprits' turned out to be those high ranking scientists that vanished a couple days ago. Their absence was due to their hiding out in a top secret lab deep within the base as the desperately tried to reverse the cause of all the trouble.

The real source of the disappearances was a prototype device they were working on that alerted how things interacted with clouds. It was supposed to alter any object be able to be supported by a cloud, without the necessity of things like cloud-walking spells, yet it had the opposite effect. While the apparatus was running, it arbitrarily disabled the cloud-walking spells of objects all over the base. The unsupported objects then instantaneously dropped through the cloud foundation of the base and plunged to the ground below.

As the scientists increased the power to the device to try to get it to work, unaware of the confusion it was causing around the base, the disruption to cloud support escalated. It got to the point where clouds could not support other clouds, such as with of the disappearing lab. It could even briefly disrupt a pegasus' natural resistance to clouds, which was the case with lieutenant general Sea Coral's daughter.

The lieutenant general's daughter was apparently uninjured after her sudden drop through the cloud layer and brief exposure to the wasteland below, and was picked up by the Enclave while trying to fly back up to the base. She's in quarantine now, and not even her father can speak to her yet (which he is rather irate about). There's talk that another pegasus is also being held in quarantine, yet nopony else in the base was unfortunate enough to fall through the clouds.

Now that the apparatus has been shut down and the scientists responsible have been arrested to stand trial, things should get back to routine here. As long as no other bizarre cloud altering events occur. I only hope that the spare key for this keyboard arrives before I have to enter the next report, or else I'll have to change the labeling of this log...

Nightmare

By Honey Mead

“Fire is life. Life is fire. Fire is life.”

She watched her opponents the best she could, her parka’s hood hindering her peripheral vision, restricting her movement, protecting her from the cold. There were four of them, two mares and two stallions, two unicorns and two earth ponies, four combatants against her alone.

None of them wore the thick layers she did, most ponies only needed a decent jacket and knit cap unless they were spending all day outdoors, their coats protecting them, an effective barrier against the cold. The two earth ponies both wore heavy steel barding, thick wool liners protecting them from their armour, cumbersome things that slowed their movement as much as her parka. In lighter vests with ceramic plates sewn in, the unicorns seemed to flow and dance as they circled her, ignoring the gusts of frigid wind as though it were a warm spring day.

A deep breath of the glacial air braced her, chilled her, froze her lungs. Hate, pain, and rage boiled together and filled her. A single bead of sweat formed on her brow, rolling down her hairless muzzle, hanging from her chin before dripping off and freezing mid fall.

With no horn of her own, the soft brown parka had been designed to easy removal, velcro straps ripping away, screaming as they were torn apart. She cast the coat away.

All five shivered and clenched their teeth as the parka hit the dirt, though for vastly different reasons. Even after so long, she could not ignore the air’s gelid caress; for the others, however, disgust and nausea curled their noses and pushed them back.

With chattering teeth and uncontrollable tremors, she grinned.

==Ember==

No matter how brightly the sun shines on Las Pegasus, the heart of winter never leaves. Cold winds blow through the snow covered streets, pushing the white fluff into drifts three storeys tall. Teeth of ice hang from any overhang, be it eave or wire or metal pole, many almost as old as the few ghouls who would call the ancient city home, hoar frost clinging desperately to every surface.

At one corner of the city, near the frozen docks, a pillar of pitch black smoke billowed into the sky,

drawing every waking eye, panicking some and enticing others. Where there was smoke, there was fire, and fire was life in the Winter City.

Hundreds of ponies gathered to fight against the flames that poured from what was once a small coffee shop and apartment. Ice and snow and magic battered the raging flames, for all the good it did. Despite their best efforts, the fire burned until the morning sun rose and there nothing was left but ash and char and bones.

As the sun crawled and the ashes cooled, ponies began to brave the wreckage. Charcoal was precious, the means to a fire, and there was always the chance to find something valuable. To no pony's surprise, three burnt corpses were discovered in the charred remains of beds, the burnt wooden frames were a more immediate concern.

Hours passed before the first cry was heard. A foal's call of distress that brought everypony to a stop. The second cry was louder, full of desperation and pain. Even in the Winter City, where food was almost as precious as fire, ponies were still ponies, and they began to search, digging through the ash and soot.

Half buried in a mound of ash, with a still glowing coal as large as herself gripped tightly in her legs, a tiny foal bawled, tears evaporating upon her cheek, and shivered, with nary a hair to protect her from the bitter cold.

==Ember==

The frost coating the dirt and sand at her hooves began to melt as waves of heat pulsed out of her. Her skin darkened, fresh pink flesh becoming tanned and leathery before it began to smoke and split and crack. An orange glow pulsed from between the fissures to the steady beat of her heart, her flesh continuing to darken until it was black as coal.

Heat radiated from her, the air about her wavering as the dirt at her hooves dried in an instant, the top layer cracking and curling; its moisture sapped away in a flash. She screamed, an inferno's heat pouring out of her mouth, undulating waves of distorted air billowing from between her teeth.

Liquid fire spilled from her dock into a flaming tail, orange and red dancing and whipping idly behind her. Glowing embers spit from her fetlocks, swirling into a torrent of orange flames and white ash. A mane of fire poured from her scalp, flowing down her neck and muzzle, hiding her left eye behind a curtain of flames.

She stood tall, all ash and fire, coal and cinder, eyes of roiling magma bearing down on her frozen opponents.

Each step left scorched hoof prints in the soil as she sauntered toward the mesmerized earth pony stallion. Her tail curled and thrashed, spinning and slashing against the dirt behind her, scoring it black. Without warning it spiraled into a long cord and lashed out, a lasso of fire, promising a lesson in pain. The stallion's instincts returned too late, his sloppy dodge putting him right where he least wanted to be.

The whip of flame caught his neck, coiling tightly between his helmet and torque, and filled the air with the stink of burning fur. Before he could so much as gasp, a sharp jerk pulled him forward. Years of training helped him maintain his footing; it would have been better to trip and fall.

Their lips locked, the mare's eyes closed while his widened in panic and shock. He struggled to pull away from her, from the pain and fire, his lips blistering against hers. His cry of pain granted her access, parting his lips.

The others stepped back in confusion and uncertainty as the flaming mare and armored stallion remained motionless, their lips locked together. The false intimacy broke when the stallion's legs gave out, eyes rolled back, showing only white. He slumped to the ground at her hooves, and she withdrew her tail.

The stink of brimstone poured from the unconscious stallion's mouth before he sucked in a breath of ice cold air. Black, charred hair spiraled around his exposed throat where the mare's tail had coiled, the skin underneath pink and unburnt.

Her tail resumed its thrashing, scorching the ground again and again as she faced the three remaining ponies.

The unicorn mare wielding a baseball bat in her teal magic charged, a battle cry pouring from her lips.

==Ember==

Black Waltz, cream of coat and black of mane, didn't bother to knock as she pushed into her 'daughter's' room. It was easy to find the filly, or at least to identify her hiding place. An igloo of blankets and comforters could cover her form, but not the abrasive sound of her cries.

Trotting softly toward the tiny hill, Black Waltz called for her 'daughter' with words she'd been told were soothing. Vague memories of her own mother speaking such words reaffirmed their use.

Laying on her belly, she set her head to rest at the small entrance and was rewarded with the smell of smoke and ash.

“Ember, dear, you mustn't burn the blankets.” A slight movement of the cloth might have been a nod, but it was the sudden drop in temperature that confirmed obedience. “That’s my girl. Now, tell mama what’s wrong.”

The hidden filly tried to sniff, but only managed a dry cough. “They- they’re making fun of me, mama!”

Waltz recoiled in genuine surprise. “What?”

Ember tried to sniff again, the sound more akin to rubbing sandpaper, as she crawled to the entrance and poked her hairless, wrinkled, flesh-pink muzzle into the apartments chilly air and shivered.

“They’re calling me ‘blank-flank’ and saying that I’ll never get my cutie mark!” The last was said with what should have been a tear filled wail, but true tears were a luxury that Ember had never known, a nearly invisible puff of steam fogging the air before her eyes briefly.

Waltz’s surprise quickly became annoyance, with only the smallest hint of concern. She’d been dreading this day. Colts and fillies were so... finicky about these things and it was such a bother to find the right words. Ember’s condition, and the reason she’d adopted her, made it all the more difficult. The truth was that she probably already had a cutie mark, but with no coat for it to appear on, they would never know.

Taking Ember in her forelegs, Waltz drew her out of the cloth cave and into what she believed to be a motherly hug. A steady heat far above an average pony’s radiated from Ember as she burrowed into Waltz’s own furry chest, her evaporating tears condensing in the black hairs.

An idea struck her, a solution to her ‘daughter’s’ current little problem. “Of course you will, my daughter, I already have my best artist working on it. Don’t worry, you will have a truly unique mark the likes of which no pony has ever seen.”

==Ember==

Ember leapt back to avoid the clumsily swung aluminium bat. The up-swing, however, caught under her jaw, and she stumbled back. The bat wielding mare pressed her advantage, striking a flurry of blows over the blackened pony’s shoulders and neck.

Ember screamed in pain and retreated with each blow. She lashed out at the mare with her liquid fire tail, attempting to snatch either the bat or the mare herself, but failing. The few hits she scored did little more than burn black streaks over the protective ceramic plates.

Rearing up, she aimed a kick at the mare's horn, only to catch a nasty blow to her temple. The world tilted and she crumpled to the ground in a heap. With sputtering sparks, Ember's mane and tail fizzled and died.

The unicorn panted heavily from her exertion as she edged closer, keeping the bat between them as she eyed the downed mare. She still breathed, the fissures in Ember's black hide glowing bright with each inhalation. Her gaze drifted down Ember's sides to her flank. There, where a cutie mark should have been, was a symbol, a brand, a crescent moon surrounded by stylized flames.

Another step closer and the mare poked at Ember's shoulder. She didn't move. Using the bat, she tilted her head.

Ember struck like a viper, her teeth snapping over the bat's rounded tip. An orange light glowed around the hoof wide metal as she smiled.

The unicorn jumped back, wrenching the weapon back with her. It warped, stretching like a rope of taffy as Ember retained her bite on the tip. Ember reared up, spitting the glob of melting aluminum into the air before kicking it, sending it flying toward the unicorn. She dodged, leaning her head to the side and let the ball pass, not noticing the length still connecting it to the handle in her magic. The viscous metal cord caught her neck, searing her even as it tethered around her, the ball tip arcing back, speeding up with each coiling pass, until it struck her horn, cracking the bone and sending her to the ground.

Ember didn't watch. She turned to the last two ponies, a predatory gleam in her eyes as her mane and tail flared back to life.

The unicorn stallion and earth pony mare shared a glance before dashing to the sides, hoping to flank their prey.

==Ember==

Ember trotted at her mother's side. Although she was still an ear shorter than the old mare, she was finally of age. Today, on the fifth anniversary of *finding* her cutie mark, she would finally get to witness her destiny, to see her purpose in action.

Four of the *Legends'* starting line followed at a respectful distance. Stillo, called Asp, in a form fitting dress that, by all rights, should have made movement nearly impossible. Laurel Braid, called T'Ourea, could not be seen behind his full body suit of granite armor. The unicorn known only as 'Dynamo' covered herself piecemeal Steal Ranger armor. Lastly, Leon, called Sphinx, whose thick fur was all the protection he needed.

For Ember and Waltz they provided a sense of comfort. Neither left their home in the company of less than two, and neither feared walking the Winter City's streets at night.

Black Waltz wore a light, shimmering, black cloak over her cream coat to ward off the chill. Her long black mane done up in a series of curls that bounced with every step. A pair of small, circle framed, sunglasses sat on her muzzle but did little to hide her violet eyes.

Compared to the others, Ember was a puffed up fur ball. Her light brown parka was easily half a hoof thick and covered her from head to dock and wither to hoof with a hood pulled up to protect her face. Only the nail of her toe and the tip of her snout could be seen poking out of the thick coat, a white fur lining puffing out at the edges. The bulk of the whole thing made walking a chore and removal a pain, but it was either that or never step outside.

Despite the thick parka, she shivered and slid closer to her mother. Waltz glanced at her for a moment, but otherwise said nothing.

Exiting the stairwell, the group stepped once more into the sunlight and Ember's gasp of delight became a cough.

Before them, easily more than one hundred meters long and fifty meters wide, the frost coated, bloodstained, dirt covered arena came into view. From their vantage point the ponies on the field looked no bigger than dolls as they moved the day's terrain into place. The scarred steel walls were bolted together and anchored to the ground creating the look of a ruined city thoroughfare running to opposite corners with all the building cut down to the only the first floor to allow the spectators an unobstructed view.

A four panel projector, suspended over the center of the arena by eight massive cables, hung black and lifeless as the audience filed in, taking their seats.

Ember could barely contain her excitement as she and her mother sat down on heated cushions in their private box. It wasn't long before the bundled up mare's hooves were tapping in anticipation of the coming spectacle.

Soon, though far too long by Ember's count, the masses were all seated and the projector blinked to life. Conversations quickly petered out as every eye turned to the face staring down at them.

Rancor smiled down at his subjects with a muzzle much longer and thinner than a pony's. Though his small, red eyes and black tipped nose were off putting to most, the two long seven pointed antlers that crowned his head were what drew the most attention. The elk, whose physical form could be made out standing in his own private box, began to speak.

“Welcome, my little ponies, to the one hundred fifty-ninth Winter City Games!”

==Ember==

None of the still standing ponies carried a weapon, they didn't need to.

The earth pony mare, her mark a broken stone, struck first. Stomping both forehooves, she sent tiny tremors through the ground. Ember moved, barely avoiding the pillars of rock and earth that exploded from the ground she'd been standing over moments before. Unfortunately, the unicorn was ready for her. A blast of pure kinetic force shot from his horn, punching Ember's side and sending her tumbling and skidding along the ground.

Rolling with the hit, Ember ended on her hooves and juked to the side, narrowly avoiding the earth pony's attack as two more pillars erupted from where she'd landed.

Ember galloped to the edge of the field, the open arena offered nothing in the way of cover or concealment, there would be no hiding. Banking right, she dodged another blast from the unicorn and brought both her opponents into her side view.

The earth pony turned to follow her, but remained rooted in her spot at the arena's center. The unicorn, however, was slowly trotting in a small circle, keeping pace with Ember, waiting for her to turn to meet them and saving his energy.

Ember smiled even as the cracks in her hide expanded. Lengthening her strides, she barreled onward, kicking up clouds of charred dirt and ash with every step. All around her the ground trembled and shuddered as the earth pony sent pillars and sink holes to trip her up. The unicorn, however, waited. His horn wreathed in a cyan glow as he held back his magic to watch the galloping mare.

Bringing her opponents into a line, Ember juked right, bearing a one pony stampede down on the unicorn.

The unicorn, his mark a pair of crossed thick red gloves, focused his magic into a single blast to put Ember down for good. He didn't notice the black cloud in Ember's wake shrink and disappear, nor the low roar of the wind following her.

Boxer's magic fired in the same moment Ember leapt into the air, wings of fire unfolding from her back to carry her over his head. The magical blast careened through the cloud, doing nothing to hinder its progress. Ash and char filled the air, stung his eyes and burned his lungs. Hammer's warning call went unheard as Ember, landing behind the coughing and sputtering unicorn, gave her tail a single flick. The roaring inferno lasted only a moment, but left the unicorn laying on his side, sucking in

lungfuls of carbon dioxide.

The two earth ponies glared at each other across the distance that separated them. Once again, it was Hamer who struck first. Repeating the same motion as before, Ember dodged left, only for the pillars of stone to fail to appear. Instead, a group of hoof sized rocks and sod jumped high into the air around Hammer.

Leaping straight up, she spun, hooves and tail sending the stones sailing toward Ember. Even as the flaming mare dodged most of the rocks, Hammer crashed to the ground and sent another salvo's worth of stones into the air around her.

Ember growled as she fought to avoid barrage after barrage, her hooves scrambling and tail thrashing to keep the largest from reaching her. Her best efforts proved ineffective as stones made it past her guard, beating against her hide.

Screaming in pain and anger, Ember's mane expanded, engulfing her in flames from head to hoof.

Hamer barely had time to land before a hot, dry voice whispered in her ear.

"Boo."

It was already too late to move, but she tried. A pair of back forelegs latched around her neck and held her fast. The metal plates designed to withstand almost any blunt force were useless against the heat radiating from the mare grappling with her. Both mare's fell to the ground and rolled as Hammer fought to escape Ember's death grip. In seconds sweat began to soak Hammer's coat.

Caught in an oven, her skin beginning to bake beneath the conductive armour plates and every breath burning her throat, she finally stopped struggling and tapped Ember's side twice with a hoof.

Ember released her and rolled to her hooves. Hammer remained prone as she tore off the over-heated plates of armor, desperate to escape the smoldering, glowing plates.

Ember's victorious grin only lasted for a fraction of a second. The flames surrounding her, mane, fetlocks, and tail, winking out as she collapsed to her side. Her black, charred skin reverted to the warped pink of flesh, the cracks sealing up and her mark returning to its natural black state.

With no heat to keep it at bay, the cold air rushed over Ember, and she began to shiver uncontrollably.

A unicorn mare, who'd watched from the sidelines, galloped across the small arena of broken dirt, picking up the discarded parka as she did so. With practiced speed, she wrapped the shivering earth pony in both the parka and a hug, nearly crying as she worked what warmth she could back into Ember's shivering form.

“C-c-c-co- c-c-c-co-”

The smaller mare squeaked and nodded violently at Ember’s chittering. Pulling a soot black rock from her saddlebags, she pressed it to Ember’s lips. The earth pony snapped it from the air, black flakes falling from her mouth as she crunched her way through the coal. A second and third were summarily consumed before her shivering finally began to abate.

Once Ember was coaxed to her hooves, she looked up into the stands. Only empty seats greeted her.

An aged unicorn mare, her face and sides pocked with old scars stepped forward, stone wore more expression. “You’ll do.” Ember nodded without looking away from the empty stadium seats, her mother still not appearing out of thin air. “Have you decided on a name, or am I going to have to pick one for you?”

Ember nodded again and finally broke off her search, two orbs of roiling magma staring into the coach’s eyes. “Yes,” she said, gritting her teeth to keep them from clicking, ”Nightmare.”

Overdose

By Wirepony

The small town of Cherrysburg lived for its orchard. The Stable built under the town had been provided with the standard apple orchard, and a separate stand of cherry trees. The stable ponies had built, and fortified, and learned, and expanded. When the second wall went up, they had used the space inside it to transplant saplings from the Stable.

The cherries had thrived under the diligent caretaking of the Stable ponies. Unicorn ingenuity had allowed them to purify the soil and concentrate the gloomy sun. Earth pony love had bolstered the infant trees against storms and poor nutrition, and before long there were cherries.

Fresh cherries, healthy and round. A rarity in the Wasteland, precious and delicious. Word spread, and the town of Cherrysburg grew and prospered along with the trees. Trade followed, and bushels of cherries left the city in caravans and on pony backs. Outsiders trickled in slowly, and the population of the town grew.

Bountiful Harvest her hooves up on a massive cherrywood desk, leaning back in the upholstered chair removed from her old office. “By all that’s delicious, youngster. I must be in heaven.” She crowed. “Loamy, did you ever imagine we could have gotten this far?”

The pony so addressed waved a hoof indulgently, concentrating on the paperwork spread over her much smaller scrap metal desk.

“I mean, who’d have thought such a town could have sprouted from just a few little cherry trees?”

“Two dozen trees of three varieties isn’t a ‘few’, mother.” Loamy grumbled. “And ‘little’ doesn’t fit either, the king tree was big enough to make your desk from just a few planks.”

“Fine, fine, don’t respect the Mayor. I’ll just have you thrown in the stockade, young lady!”

“Mother...”

“Oh, be that way. I’ll just go see my son on the wall, at least he’ll have time for his broken down old mother.” Bountiful Harvest made her lazy way out of her office. She paused to brush a nonexistent speck of dust off the sign on her door.

“Love you, mamma.” Loamy said quietly from inside the small building. Bountiful Harvest smiled.

“Love you too, cherry pit.”

Cherrysburg hummed with activity, ponies dragging carts full of cherries from the orchard or hauling farming equipment to. A squad of ponies in dark red leather armor trotted by, singing a bawdy song about red curved flanks. Bountiful Harvest stepped smoothly through her town, stepping out of the way of a burly earth pony with a cart of early season Viva cherries. She snatched one out of a basket and munched on it contemplatively. Her legs carried her on a winding path out to the inner wall.

“Halt and identify yourself!” A voice thundered. Bountiful Harvest jumped back, laughing. A rough cut pony scampered through the gate, startled by the goings-on. With a clattering thump, a dark red earth pony leapt off the top of the wall. Landing in front of Bountiful, the pony whipped a short sword through a flourishing drill, ending with it levelled at Bountiful.

“Oh my blessed strudel, whatever shall I do against such a fierce protector!” Bountiful said, laughing. The pony negligently sheathed his sword and leaned forward to take her in a firm embrace.

“Hi, momma mayor,” he said. Bountiful Harvest leaned into his embrace, then took a step back to clop her son on a shoulder.

“You trying to scare the life out of your poor old mother, you rapsCALLION?” She asked querelously. The buck snorted laughter, laying his hoof over his mother’s.

“As if anything could take you away from us.”

Bountiful Harvest hugged her son again, then motioned at the gate. “I was heading to the big wall, walk with me?”

“Of course, of course.”

The two ponies made their way through the ring of orchards surrounding the inner town. The path was straight, but their route was not. The blossoms were just starting to bud on the trees nearest the path, and the pair meandered amongst them, spending time with each tree they passed. The outer wall soon lay before them, and Bountiful Harvest climbed the steep stairs inside of it. The land outside the wall was normally as busy as the city, but today it was nearly bare of ponies headed towards the gate.

“What’s this all about?” Bountiful Harvest asked as her son made it up the stairs behind her.

“I’m not sure, mom.”

The first person to reach Cherrysburg’s outer gate was familiar to the two ponies, a ghould goat piled high and strapped thick with parcels. His normal shuffling gait was missing, replaced with a frantic pounding of his old cloven hooves.

“Buddy, what’s the hurry?” Bountiful shouted down. The old ghoul leaped straight into the air, recovering himself in an awkward clatter of legs and belongings.

“Bountiful Harvest, thank flank itself!” Buddy cried. Stumbling and clattering through the wide open gate, the ghoul practically stumbled up the stairs. Bountiful Harvest and her son stepped back as the smell of herbs and medicines overlaid with long dead flesh made it up the wall first.

“Buddy, Buddy, you smell even worse than normal, are you sweating? Can ghouls sweat? What’s wrong?!” Bountiful Harvest gasped, stretching out to pat the gasping ghoul through his almost palpable cloud of stench. Buddy flailed a cloven hoof at Bountiful, swatting away her reassurance.

“They’re coming, Bounty. More- *gasp* raiders than I’ve ever seen!” Buddy panted. “And they’re organized! They’ve got a leader, some freaky little mutant and her oversized son.” Buddy flattened himself against the narrow surface of the wall.

“What do you mean, coming, Buddy? Raider bands have tried these walls before, and my boys have always beaten them back.”

“Bounty, this isn’t a band, it’s an army.”

Silence was her only reply, and she paid more attention to the ponies streaming away from her town. They looked scared, and many of them were avoiding the beaten path, heading into the nearby hills.

“Boy, go rouse the Militia.”

“Mother, on the word of an old ghoul?”

“On the word of someone I’ve known since my first month out of the Stable. Now GIT!” Bounty said, shoving the stallion. Her son turned and bounded down the stairs. “On your hooves, Buddy.” Bounty helped the ghoul back upright, and Buddy leaned against the outer wall.

“I’ve been running for a day, literally. They cleaned me out, I don’t even have a brick of hash on me, Bounty.” Buddy moaned. Bounty rubbed his head with a friendly hoof.

“Well you’ve at least got a blunt to share with an old friend, I hope?”

“You know I do, sister.”

The two remained on the wall while the militia ponies ran around shouting and preparing. Buddy made his unsteady way down the stairs and headed for the Stable, hiding in the deepest hole he could find. Bounty stared out at the Wasteland as the day wore on. The final thud of the gate slamming closed startled her, and she stared at the smoldering butt laying on the ground outside the gate.

“Pits.”

The sun peeked below the clouds in the tiny space between gloom and nightfall, and still no raider army approached Cherrysburg. Bountiful Harvest had returned to her office, following up on her son’s distribution of the militia members and approving of them. The mare made her way downstairs to her quarters, and threw herself into bed.

“Oof!”

“Buddy!”

Bountiful Harvest was up before the sun. Her step was firm and confident as she trotted to the inner gate. Her son was below, sleeping. The lieutenant in charge overnight saluted gravely as she approached.

“Good morning, Miss Harvest.” The pony said quietly. Bountiful nodded, clambering to the inner wall’s platform.

“Good morning, Tricky.” She replied, turning to look over the orchards.

“All quiet so far, ma’am. The sentries haven’t reported-”

A sharp whistle cut the air, and both ponies whipped their heads around to look. At the outer gate, a sentry came running towards them on the path. Bountiful bounded down and through the inner gate, pelting out to meet the sentry halfway.

“Ma’am, they’re here!”

“Ok youngster, tell that Tricky what’s going on, then go roust my son. I’m headed for the gate.”

“Yes’m!” The sentry said, then ran off. Bountiful Harvest trotted to the outer gate, her steps heavy on the packed earth.

Mounting the stairs to the platform just inside the peak of the wall, Bountiful took a deep breath and peered out at a mass of ponies that justified Buddy’s descriptor of ‘army’. Loose ranks of ponies stretched out before her, spread widely and deeply around her town’s main gate. The path was open, the only straight lines in the horde were around the main drag into Cherrysburg.

Bountiful Harvest gasped as the sun peeked up on the horizon, grudgingly lending its meager light to the horde facing her. The ponies were raiders, fit to type and festooned with spikes and horrible weapons. Some of them were eye catching even in the mass, one there with pony skulls as

shoulderpads, one with ponyhide armor made of flapping cutie marks. There an earth pony with one eye, picking his teeth with a unicorn horn. There an unmistakable shape of a pony corpse turning on a spit hung over a crackling fire.

And all quiet. Bountiful scanned the mass, picking out atrocity after atrocity. Her gaze kept returning to the carefully clear lane pointing right down the middle at the gate of Cherrysburg. The sun rose above the eternal cloud cover, and the normal gloom of the Wasteland hid the majority of the horrible herd from Bountiful's sight. She heaved a sigh and slumped against the inside of the wall. Approaching hooves heralded her son, and she drug him the last few steps to the platform.

“We’re in it now, son. Look at them! Buddy was right, that’s an army!” She choked out, gesturing to the filled space in front of her town. Her son’s Wasteland born eyes pierced the gloom better than hers, and he gulped nervously as the array of raiders was revealed. Steadying himself from his initial rush of fear, the stallion began making an assessment of the horde.

“Mother, that’s a lot of ponies.” He said quietly. “But not enough to take Cherrysburg.”

Bountiful blinked at his statement, staring at him incredulously. “You mean to say your militia can defeat that horde of nasty out there?”

“My soldiers,” He replied, putting a world’s worth of quiet emphasis on the term, “can defeat that mess of raider scum. Numbers aren’t the only important thing, momma.” He continued, his voice stronger and more confident as he went on. “We’ve got position, walls, and security. They can’t starve us out, we’ve got enough food and water from the Stable to keep us.”

“Barely!” Bountiful interrupted. Her son grinned fiercely at her.

“Barely, but it is enough!” He insisted. “They can’t starve us out, and They can’t take that gate down. We built it strong, mother. Strong just for this reason.” He paused to take a deep breath, then continued. “And we’ve got strong leadership. There’s no way that horde is disciplined enough to follow a leader. They’ll turn to sand when it comes down to it.”

Bountiful smiled thinly at her son, opening her mouth to comment. She was interrupted by a surge of noise from the Wasteland. The raider ponies howled, stomped, bashed their weapons against each other. The noise swelled and grew, then cut off into silence as a brace of lights crashed on. The lights were on a cart, sizable spark battery powered units that brazenly illuminated the massive throne on the cart, and the twisted caricature of a pony sprawled across this seat.

Bountiful and her son stared as the cart rolled down the empty path, drawn by a truly massive earth pony. His bulging muscles slammed each hoof into the ground like an attack, sending a puff of dust into the morning air. Instead of a conventional yoke or freighter saddle the cart was drawn behind him on a simple rope, clenched in his teeth.

The cart pulled to a halt just outside of easy gun range from Cherrysburg, and the wizened pony on the throne lurched to its hooves. It glared at the wall, then pulled a megaphone out of the cart on a sickly yellow magic.

“Citizens of Shitburg! Open your gates and your legs! Surrender yourselves and your possessions to your new rulers!”

Bountiful Harvest held a hoof to her face, hiding a giggle. Her son shot her a wide-eyed look.

“Mother!”

“I know, I know, it’s just.. so cliche!”

Bountiful’s son sighed before taking a megaphone off a hook. “Cherrysburg will never submit to the likes of you!” He shouted. The horde responded with a guttural laugh and a renewed howling.

The cart-riding pony waved a hoof and the howling cut off immediately. “That’s fine, that’s fine. Send out your finest warrior. If he can defeat my champion, we’ll just move on. If my boy wins, we’ll proceed to fuck your gate in half and take what we want! Sound like a deal?”

Bountiful set a hoof on her son’s upraised foreleg, gently pushing the megaphone down. The two shared a doubtful look. “Boy, you think you can whup their pony?”

“I’m sure of it. One piece of raider scum? No problem.”

“You be careful, son. Do your momma proud out there.”

Bountiful’s son nodded once, and turned to whistle into Cherrysburg. One of the guard ponies ran to the outer wall.

“Sir!”

“I’m going to go duel their champion. Have my lieutenant ready the troops, they may attack even after I win.”

“Sir!”

The pony ran back into town, and Bountiful’s son returned the megaphone to its hook. Sharing a quick embrace with his mother, he took a deep breath and leapt over the wall. He landed in front of the gate with a thud, brushing dust off his armor and flexing.

“Alright, you ravenous freak. Let’s do this!” He shouted. A low ripple of laughter bounced through

the horde.

“Heh, you ain’t seen ravenous yet. Go kill the fucker, sonny.” The twisted unicorn stabbed a brace of chems into the scarred-over cutie mark of the massive earth pony, who dropped the rope and roared in fury. The colossal off-yellow stallion reared, screaming as he slammed his forehooves into the earth. His massive muscles bulged even further as the chems streamed into his system.

Bountiful’s son held his position as the enraged monster pounded towards him. He reached past his sword, and pulled out his pistol. Eleven pulls of the trigger dumped eleven rounds into the oncoming wall of flesh, and slowed it not at all.

The Cherrysburg soldier threw his empty pistol at his opponent and drew his sword. The short militia blade gleamed in the light from the cart, and he bravely attempted to parry the first hoofstrike of his yellow foe. The giant pony swatted his blade out of his grasp, sending it and several teeth spinning across the Wasteland.

Bountiful Harvest gasped, a hoof pressed to her chest. The colossus knocked a splash of blood out with his backhoof, and laughed. Lunging forward, he clutched Bountiful’s son to his chest and squeezed. The pony roared laughter as he crushed Cherryburg’s son to his chest, a splatter of blood marring his filthy coat.

Bountiful’s son flailed weakly, his strikes smearing his own blood around to no effect. The raider champion changed his grip, and twisted powerfully. The horrible crackling crunch drew a shriek from Bountiful Harvest, and she clung to the wall as her son’s limp body fell to the ground.

“Ha ha ha ha! I’m coming for you, next! If you open the gate, I’ll kill you before I fuck you!” The giant yelled. Bountiful staggered sideways, nearly falling off the wall. A stinky undead limb propped her up as Buddy mounted the stairs.

“That’s not good.” Buddy said quietly. “That’s not good at all, man.”

The ghoul clung to the wall and the suddenly sobbing Bountiful Harvest as everything shook. The massive raider pony slamming into the gate. The normal raiders pulled the cart closer under the exhortations of the spindly unicorn. As the cart closed into range, the unicorn floated out another bundle of chems and slammed it into the huge pony’s flank. Another roar answered this action, followed by an enraged slamming against the gate. Buddy narrowed his rheumy old eyes at this, then whirled and started shouting into the crowd of Cherrysburg militia milling about the space between the walls.

“Unicorn! Unicorn! I need a damn horn head right fucking now!”

A militia unicorn was shoved forwards, and clambered up the stairs to the platform. Bountiful Harvest

slumped wailing to the platform, and Buddy dug frantically into his saddlebags. Syringes and pill bottles and baggies of drugs flew, and the goat came up with a thick bag of white powder in his mouth. He spat it out, wobbling as the wall shook under a fresh assault.

“Alright Pokey Pierce, do exactly what I say or we’re fucked, got it?”

“Uhhhh, yessir?”

“Good boy. Now, take that bag in your magic.” The unicorn complied, his eyes wide and his stance shaky. Buddy dived back into his bag, pulling out a package of empty syringes, the plastic caps still on their needle tips. Buddy grinned triumphantly and opened the package with swift hoofwork. “Ok, ok, ok. It’s OK. Take these, and when I’m finished with each one, mix a whole bunch of that coke into it, then put the plunger in.”

The unicorn nodded, taking the syringes in his magic field. Buddy snatched one back and bent, filling it from a water bottle. As he held up the filled syringe, the unicorn snatched it gently away, replacing it with an empty.

One two three four syringes, then five six seven eight before they were all full. Buddy cursed as one fell out of the unicorn’s magic field, spiralling off the platform into the orchard. “Seven will have to be enough. OK, hornhead - take those syringes, and stab ‘em into Ugly’s neck. All of ‘em. Give him the full dose.”

The unicorn nodded shakily, pale and sweaty under his cherry red leather armor. Buddy snatched the bag of cocaine out of the unicorn’s magic field. Darting a hoof inside, he wiped a thin smear of white under the unicorn’s nose and stuffed the closed bag back into his endless pockets. “That’ll steady you, laddy. Now, before he takes the gate down, make him a porcupone!”

The coke hit the unicorn’s system, just a tiny bump. His shakes faded, and he practically leaped forward to the edge of the wall. The seven syringes swirled out of his way as he sneezed violently, then hung before him for a split second before whipping into the colossal attacker.

In a flash of magic and a thump of impact, seven massive hits of cocaine slammed into the already stimulated system of the gigantic earth pony. His massive heart, greasy with fat and swelled from abuse, exploded. With a roar that sent Buddy and the two Cherrysburgh ponies tumbling off the wall, the colossus fell. His corpse shook the earth like a quake, and the Cherrysburg militia finally took to the wall. Disciplined bursts of gunfire and controlled barks of magical energy weapons filled the air with their warlike noise, and beneath it all Buddy huddled with the sobbing Bountiful Harvest and the militia unicorn.

The battle raged on throughout the day, the energized and ably led militia blunting the raider’s attacks until the gunfire tapered off as the sun peeked redly under the clouds. The battle for Cherrysburg was

over, they had won.

In the aftermath, the militia unicorn and the rotting goat ghoul accompanied Bountiful Harvest into the clear area in front of the gate. Her son's body lay untouched behind the mound of his killer's corpse. The two ponies and the goat ghoul brought the body into town and laid it on a bier with the other fallen. After the ceremonies and the funeral pyre for the honored dead, they returned to the gate for the more grisly duty of handling the raider's bodies.

They paused at the carcass of the huge earth pony. He lay on his side, clutching vainly at his chest. His cutie mark was blurred and made unreadable under dozens of old injection sites, the flesh infected and ruined. The three ponies stood staring at the dead hulk for long minutes. Overhead, the clouds grumbled and began to drizzle a cold rain.

"Buddy." Bountiful Harvest said, her voice cracked and worn from crying. "How'd you kill him? What killed him?"

Buddy paused for a long moment, staring at the small stand of syringes sticking out of the corpse.

"Overdose."

Peril

By The Changeling Prince2

“Sometimes, fear is the appropriate response.”

“Cotton candy?”

Peril. Never had I had any reason to consider the word ever applying to any situation I would find myself in. Yet now I found myself at the edge of death nearly every day.

I hated Canterlot. No, not Canterlot. I hated the Pink Cloud.

I had once been happy. Ignorant? Yes. Mindless? Well, I personally thought that was up for debate. Loved? ...I honestly don't know.

But I had been happy. The Goddess had united us under a common mind, in a bond closer than even a mother and child could have.

Then I came to this hated place, where I could not hear my sisters because of that Cloud, which blocked everything, and brought back memories. I still felt uncomfortable looking at my blue coat and remembering a vibrant red, seeing wings I never had, and looking at my marehood (shut up, it was to check for parasites! Canterlot has really nasty ticks for some reason...) and remembering I had... other attributes before the Goddess changed me. But then I came to Canterlot and the Pink Cloud.

The Pink Cloud. I hated it more than any of my sisters in Canterlot did, I was sure of it. I was more cautious too. Yet the threat of the Cloud always loomed. I had seen the skeletons and the ghouls, fused to anything they had worn or touched. I was always the first to flee when the Cloud came, whether or not a larger danger threatened. Perhaps that was stupid, but seeing a foal fused to its carriage can do a number on your paranoia.

I had seen horrible things in the Wasteland. Families slain by Raiders. Star spawn laying waste to towns. The horrid monstrosities created when lesser ponies were exposed to Taint. In an old hospital, I had once found myself surprised and assaulted by horrible bloated once-ponies who attempted to impregnate me with their bastard spawn. I killed them, but the three mares I had been tagging were not so lucky. Yet all of them were nothing compared to the Cloud's horrors. I woke up at night sweating from the nightmares caused by what I had seen the previous day.

Maybe I was more tired than normal. Maybe I wasn't paying as close attention as I normally would. Maybe, maybe, maybe... whatever the reason, the point was that I was now flying for my life. Cloud was all around me. I didn't dare close my eyes or open my mouth. I flew blindly, the only one of my

little group of 20 alicorns left. I flew... and broke the Cloud barrier. I saw the Wasteland. I felt the tendrils of the Unity creep, but it was fuzzy, like when we spoke to the lesser pony kinds. But I felt something... in my amazement, I had gasped... at the edge of the barrier. Cloud must have entered my lungs, and now I felt dizzy. I was having trouble breathing. I fell from the air and crashed. The last thing I saw was a cruel joke. A shaft of sunlight had pierced the sky, illuminating the Pink Cloud in a display of horrible beauty, like cotton candy at a fair, or the pink Ministry Mare's smiling face. I sneered and spat up blood. I directed my last words in a hoarse whisper at the Cloud.

“Damn you.”

Quarry

By No_One

When I was a foal living in the outskirts of Dise, I used to hunt radroaches in ruined buildings. When those got too easy, I moved up to scorpions in the tunnels underneath the city. I knew my calling. Of course, I couldn't stay hunting small game in the city; I had to go out, to conquer the wasteland. For the most part I did a good job, clearing out geckos to the north and cazdopplegangers to the west. I even managed to take out a few young landsharks when a village was worried they were trying to move out of their canyon nest; and what a ripe mess that would have been.

So when I was contracted by Roy Mustang to head down to a newly established hellhound den based in an old quarry to kidnap a few cubs for some special "training," I jumped at the chance. I'd never really heard of a hellhound before, because apparently they were native to Equestria to the north, and figured I'd taken on worse things in my tenure.

I was wrong.

I barely made it a couple hundred meters into the quarry before I felt a slight rumbling in the ground. I didn't know what it was, but something in my gut told me to jump out of the way.

Thank Celestia I did. The great brown beast tore out of the ground in a flurry of dirt and stone so fast and hard even jumping away couldn't save my tail from being severed.

"Pony go away!" it roared as I backed up.

BANG BANG BANG

My .308 rifle cycled through it's entire magazine. My smirk grew larger and larger as each bullet slammed into the creature's chest. This was going to be easier to expected.

Until the hellhound looked down at it's wounded chest for only half a second before charging at me.

So much for an easy job.

The hellhound was catching up. I could hear it's claws scraping against the ground behind me. I had to think quick. Luckily I was a unicorn, so I had a whole bag of tricks. I squeezed my eyes tight and...

KABOOM

An old trick I learned when I was young, a simple loud burst of sound and light. I used to use it as a distraction before, but as I got better at it, I found it worked best for incapacitating tricky beasts. A touch of genius you might say. I didn't bother looking back at the creature or trying to shoot though, it was clearly too tough for my rifle and I wasn't confident my trick would hold it off for long.

My eyes scanned the quarry quickly. Rocks, rocks, rocks, rock crusher, more rocks, ah a crane! I

charged towards it, hoping to climb to the top and get something resembling the high-ground, from there I could change to my more potent AP ammo and rain death from on high.

I might have over estimated the difficulty of the mission, but I was nothing if not resourceful, so success was still inevitable.

I reached the massive crane, and when I looked back the Hellhound was just starting to shake away the effects of my spell. It wasn't the only spell I knew of course, and I quickly concentrated to teleport on top of the operators cabin of the crane.

Describing teleportation is really kind of difficult, it's sort of like jumping, but with your mind. I supposed you'd have to be a unicorn to understand.

From there I made my way up the lattice, all the while reloading my .308 with some sweet sweet armour piercing rounds. By the time I reached the top the damnable hellhound was already climbing up the cabin towards the lattice I was perched precariously on.

I weighed my options quickly. I could probably take out the creature from where I was, but if it climbed up here my limited teleportation skills wouldn't take me anywhere safe. I also wondered if maybe climbing up here was a bad idea, but quickly abolished the notion from my mind. I decided to use another flashbang to slow it down. While I was a master of many spells, I didn't have the endurance to cast many in such a short period, and if there were more of those creatures nearby, I would want to be as powerful as possible.

I decided that safety now was a much better possibility than safety later. Closing my eyes, I unleashed another burst.

The lattice shook beneath me, forcing me to open my eyes and brace myself. With a startled gasp I looked down to see the hellhound, half-blind and roaring in pain, swinging it's gigantic claws in a panic towards the bars that kept me afloat. With seemingly effortless ease the creature severed the scaffolding from the cabin, and suddenly I was flying.

I had always wondered what it was like to be a pegasi.

I barely had time to react. The rocky ground getting closer. My heart was in my throat. For a moment I lost all confidence.

Only for a moment.

My horn glowed a magnificent purple. Below me I cast one of my patented shield spells. A straight plane of glowing magic appeared below me. Not parallel to the ground (because that'd just kill me sooner) but diagonal, so that when I hit it I would-

“FUCK!” I screamed involuntarily as I slammed into the shield shoulder first. Before I had the time or wherewithal to find more curse words, I slid down the plane and landed in a heap in the dirt, a large pointed rock stabbing me in the spine.

“Fuck.” I repeated, trying to ignore my throbbing shoulder and back. Okay, so maybe I was just a little overconfident, but I had setbacks before. Just ignore the pain and...

The creature roared.

I didn't even bother swearing again, I just scrambled to my feet and took off like a mad pony. When I was a colt I had always won all my childhood races, but my unusual speed didn't seem to be as useful as I would have liked. The damnable beast was simply too big, and its strides were far longer than my own. It was catching up. I had to think of something...

There, the answer to my problems. The hellhounds had chosen a quarry, and that would be their undoing. There in the middle of the gray excavation site was a rock crushing machine, that had two conveyor belts leading up to it from either direction.

In the past the conveyor belt was used to carry rocks up to be dumped into the top of the crusher, but now it was just carrying me. I managed to reach the top in record time, and quickly turned around to see the Hellhound precariously close behind my. Nervously I looked behind me to see the machines gaping maw far below, ready to swallow me whole if I messed up. But I wouldn't mess up, I had this.

Just one more spell. One more! My horn was starting to get tired, and I could feel my horn burning my insides from the sheer amount of spells I had already used, but all I needed to win was one more. One more, and I had this.

The hellhound lunged at me, flying through the air. A weaker pony would have given up, but I just focused on my horn.

I vanished and reappeared on the conveyor belt on the other side of the rock crusher, confident in my victory. The hellhound screeched, but without me there to stop him he went soaring into the machines innards. Now all I had to do was push the on button and victory would be mi-

ZAP

Something hot slammed into my chest. I stumbled for a second, trying to steady myself, but one of my hooves slipped off the narrow conveyor belt. I felt myself falling, my jaw slammed into the belt, and I was flipped head over hooves off.

I didn't have time to cast a shield this time. I hit the ground hard. So much pain. I couldn't even swear. I couldn't think. All I could do was gasp for air. All I could think was: What the fuck hit me!?

The answer became obvious a second later when a second hellhound appeared in my blurry vision, blocking out the clouds above. In its massive claw was a MEW rifle...

My telekinesis searched for my rifle, but it was nowhere to be found... I wasn't even sure where I had lost it.

The dog bared its teeth in a macabre imitation of a smile. Its gun was pointed at my head. Oh.

My horn lit up. One last spell, I just needed one last spell, I could do it. They were just hellhounds, and I was the best hunter in Dise. Just a setback.

The green bolt of magic slammed into my shield wall, shaking but not dispersing it. I could still win. I

had magic and-

The hellhound slammed it's claw through my shield shredding it into wisps of purple.

“Oh.” I said when I realized the creature's claw had impaled my torso. It didn't hurt... I couldn't feel it... I couldn't feel anything but inevitability.

The hellhound pointed it's MEW at my head one more time, and when it pulled the trigger all I wondered if maybe ponies were never meant to be hunters. If maybe we were the prey, not the predators.

Robots

By TenMihara

The following is an excerpt from the Wasteland Survival Guide;
Chapter 6: *Making Pre-War Technology Work For You*

Robots.

Among the accomplishments of the pre-war industrial revolution, there is perhaps none that exemplifies the rapid technological progress better than the robot. First pioneered by the Equestrian Robotics company several years before the war, robots are fully automated, animatronic machines that fulfil a variety of purposes. Everything from providing security to washing walls. Although I don't know exactly when the first robot was made, or what it looked like, I can say for sure that they became very prominent.

As mentioned previously in this chapter, the founding of the Ministry of Wartime Technology (MWT) spurred the industrial revolution to new heights, and Equestrian Robots was another of the big companies, like Stable-Tec, that become a household name. Due to the wide variety of capabilities possessed by various robots, they were in demand in almost every sector of Equestria. Particularly in dangerous places, including battlefields, where they could help reduce loss of pony life. This means of course that lots and lots of robots were built, and like much Earth Pony engineering, they were sturdy enough to persist to the current day. A few common examples will follow.

The key to making Robots work for you is knowing how to approach them. Some of these robots have been operating for a long time with no rest, or are broken. The quickest way to make friends with a robot is to give it a fresh spark battery. Of course, some robots were designed to fight, so turning them on might just make them mad. The next best thing to do to make a robot work for you is to reprogram it. I'm honestly not sure how reprogramming works, so I suggest asking someone who knows a little more about spell matrixes. Like a Pipbuck technician, or toaster repair pony. Just don't try turning a toaster into a robot, it never seems to work out.

Some robots are really mean, and you should always be careful when dealing with them. Typically any robot mainly designed for military use tends to shoot first and ask questions never. One suggestion for dealing with this is of course to avoid them in the first place. However, if you can't avoid them, or are feeling gutsy enough to try reasoning with them, tie a white piece of cloth to a stick and wave it like a flag. This is a common sign of surrender, and some of these robots are designed to accept them. From there, you can negotiate terms of alliance with the military robots. Of course, if they just shoot your white flag, start running. Or shoot back, since you might get some spare parts or ammunition from the robot if you can beat it.

Robots can make very loyal allies as well as useful tools, depending on how you treat them. They may not be proper equines, but they still think and have a limited range of feelings. Friendship is, like with many things, the best approach, and like any pre-war technology, they can be made to work for you!

Common Robot Varieties:

Ponitrons: These equine shaped robots were employed mainly for security, although sometimes other companies used them for promotions. They typically have a magical energy weapon in their head-casing, but some of them have a chest weapon instead. They are a bit clunky and slow, but sturdy. They also usually have storage compartments, making them great as pack ponies.

Robo-Owls: These mechanical feathery little friends are small, light, quick, and make excellent companions. They usually have a magical energy weapon in their beak, and can fly. However, due to their size, they are easily damaged if they take a hit, and can't do any heavy lifting.

Sprite-Bots: These pre-war music machines were employed by the Ministry of Morale as bringers of joy to Equestria by spreading music. They don't really do much else.

(Author's Note: I still don't know why everyone complains about their music, it's so cheery!)

Helper-Bots: These robots may look kinda creepy, resembling hovering metal spiders, but have some of the best utility thanks to their multiple appendages. They also have storage compartments and three eye-like cameras that let them see in all directions at once. Common appendages featured include: grasping claws, cauterization flamethrowers, medical tools, plasma casters, buzzsaws, and pizza cutters.

Brain-Bots: These tracked robots, rather than using a spell matrix, use actual brain tissue for processing, housed in a special fluid in their head casing that keeps the brain healthy. They typically come armed with a lightning gun, useful for paralyzing things, and tend to have cheerful, foalish voice synthesizers.

Shady Sands Shuffle

By It-Is-JM

“It’s not about what you’re taking away from the poor bastard, it’s about what you’re giving ‘em as replacement.”

It was early morning while the fog was still out and a thick cover of mist had surrounded us. It appeared as if the only world that existed was the sphere of visibility we had before what we saw faded into a haze of gray. I wanted to get lost in that fog. It seemed so tranquil yet mysterious. It hid all of the green in the ocean, all of the ships in the harbor, and all of the blue in the sky. Instead, there was just one thing and one thing alone. Peace. Stillness. A harmony between time and nature. There was a nip in the air accompanied by a soft breeze. It tickled that my mane with a delicate chill, hinting in my ear that *a bright and sunny day was yet to come*. Just not yet.

Crackle had a rather loud and rough voice. It was especially strident because he was currently furious, spitting every time he voiced the letter, f.

“I heard about you sly little fuckers. Lancer treats you three like royalty when you all are nothing but shit stains looking to be strung up by your innards!”

Crackle paused. He was looking at Risk, Rant, and I along the edge of the dock. The three of us were slaves. We served under our master, Lancer, on the ship known as Galient Venture. Crackle was the new provost of that ship. In landlubber terms, he held the discipline of the ship’s crew. Especially of the slaves. He had gotten us out off the sip, early in the morning, and onto this dock. No pony but Crackle and I knew why we were here and that made me all the more terrified.

“I’ve just about had it. You bilge rats are going to get your bloody dues and I’m going to be one who gives them to you.”

Salt water splashed up against the pillars underneath us to break the silence. Crackle paced back and forth, glaring death at our lowered foreheads. We simply stared at the wood below his hooves. We didn’t dare stare straight on at him. I could see the whip on his side in the corner of my eye, starving for blood. I remembered how the winds whispered in my ear no more than a minute ago. *But was today really supposed to be a sunny day?*

“So tell me,” Crackle started to say. He took a menacing step toward the three of us. “Which one of you took it?”

It, that word echoed through my head. I knew what he was talking about. This wasn’t merely a charade of dominance or typical discipline. This was revenge.

“Pardon me, sir, but what was taken?” Rant asked. My heart went into my throat, because I knew what would come next.

WUH-PSSSH!

Rant squealed as the whip smacked against her ribcage. She knelt onto the dock and began to moan from the stinging pain of the whip slash. She clenched her teeth and closed her tear-filled eyes. It was as if the whip didn't just leave a singe on her body but on her soul as well.

My mouth dropped in disbelief. *This was really happening right now.* I could feel my stomach sink as I realized that this was all because of me.

“Don't act dumb with me.” Crackle kicked Rant onto her side. She groaned and trembled as she stared back up at him. For all she knew, that lash wasn't going to be her last.

I glanced over at Risk and she was keeping her signature stone face looking downward. No emotion was being shown at all. I knew that she was channeling all of that fire into pure, raw hate. If only I had a fraction of that energy right now. Instead, I felt like a twig beneath a cyclone of guilt and judgement.

“Which one of you fuckers done did it?” Crackle snarled as he leaned neck toward each of us. His accent was that of a thick northerner. His actual pronunciation of the words was something to the effect of, “Weech one o' ya fackas dun did et?”

I could smell his breath, it had reeked of rum and carrots—the most unpleasant combination. “Huh?!” he groaned as he was beginning to grow impatient. “Which one of you no-good scumbags did it?” His horn levitated the whip in a striking stance that was ready to go at a moment's notice if he wasn't going to get an answer soon.

Yet we just stood there. All of us were silent once more. I clenched my teeth as the hairs on my body stood up.

Crankle knelt down and screamed, “My fucking red delicious!” into Rant's ear. She flinched and covered her face with her hooves, protecting herself from the potential slashes that were to come.

“It was in my bloody saddlebag and you went and took it, didn't you?” Crackle continued.

“N-no, sir!” Rant stammered.

“No?” Crackle asked in a fake disbelief.

“Not at all, sir!”

“Hmm... If it wasn't you,” Crackle's face swiftly scrunched in front of mine. His yellowed eyes were lit with flames, “then was it you!” The odor of rum and carrots slammed into my nostrils just as the screaming slammed into my ears. I shook at the knees and felt like I was going to barf and faint.

“N-n-na-n-n...” I was trying to say no, but my stutter wasn't helping.

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Redondo.” I felt a quick tug of my mane and my head was pulled to look down. He couldn't stand the sight of me, let alone hear me splutter my sentences. I took this as a mercy, as I heard Crackle's footstep move further down the line. “Was it you?” he shouted at Risk.

Crackle gave no rest for Risk even though she was a mute. In fact, he has yelled her the most out of all of us because she couldn't speak. And like all punishments, she simply kept her head down and bottled up all of her fury like Rant and I knew she was.

"Oh ho ho, I bet it was you," Crackle poked Risk's forehead with a hoof. His fire was playing with hers. It was only a matter of time before somepony was going to blow.

"Hell, it could have been the both of you fucking look-alike's," he grumbled, darting his gaze back and forth from Risk to Rant and Rant to Risk. He hated those twins about as much as he hated me. He just hated all of us.

But Rant and Risk didn't deserve this, because I was the guilty one. I took one of Crackle's apples from his saddlebag while he was taking a nap yesterday. I thought he wouldn't miss it since it looked like he had plenty of extras. Why didn't I realize that he would keep count?

And why hadn't I revealed myself earlier? Now both of my friends were going to suffer.

I gulped as I boldly looked up at Crackle. I had to stop this. I had to at least try.

"Sir, please," I began to say softly, but all my words were stuck in my mouth. "This is just a..." my stutter started to kick in, "just a..." It had take control of my mouth and made my tongue kick and my teeth rattle. Now I hit the point of no return. I couldn't speak perfectly in one attempt and I knew it. So I paused mid-sentence and tried to start over.

Crackle was getting on annoyed on the other hand, "This is just a 'what,' Redondo?" He growled at me. I could hear his whip hissing at me too.

So I started the sentence over again but this time, I tried getting all the words out faster, "This is j-just a misunderst-st-st-sta..."

Of all the times for my stutter, it had to be now. *Celestia have mercy.*

I tried to continue on, "A misundersta-st-st-sta--"

WUH-PSSSH!!!

The whip slashed right across my cheek. It was like the side of my face was set ablaze with pain. I yelped and jerked backward. I ended up almost falling off the edge of dock. My reflexes caused me to collapse forward onto my stomach, a few inches away from the edge. I had forgotten the harbor was there. I put a hoof on my cheek but it couldn't contain the stinging agony.

The whip jumped around frantically, Crackle was ready to lash again, "I don't care how valuable Lancer thinks you are, all of you are getting your flanks beaten all way to..."

Before he could whip at us again, Crackle stopped dead in his tracks. I slowly glanced up and he had his gaze toward the fog. Something had caught his eye. I turned and looked out that way as well, to see what he was looking at. There was an object coming through the haze. It was a small dinghy boat, with a sole stallion rowing in it.

“Who goes there?” Crackle asked with a deadly agitation. He was both annoyed that somepony was interrupting one of his discipline sessions yet cautious since an unidentified pony was moving in on a dock that they clearly had no business in.

The stallion in dinghy did not reply though. He rowed soundlessly to the front of the dock, like a wisp, then stopped. He stood up and jumped onto the dock, tying down the boat down to one of the dock’s beams.

“Oi! Don't anchor there, this is a reserved dock!” Crackle yelled, this time with more assertion. He turned his back on us three and began menacingly approach the stallion.

The stallion looked up, a coat was covering his body as was a privateer’s hat casting a shadow over his face. His darkened eyes stared back at Crackle as he got onto his hooves after anchoring the dinghy. “Doesn't this belong to Lancer?” He asked.

“Of course, it does. Who the hell are you?” Crackle snarled.

“Someone you shouldn't bark at, mate,” The stallion said as he tipped his hat back. He had a solemn tan furred face. “Lancer's expecting me.”

Crackle was unconvinced and he held his ground. “I didn't hear about nopony coming to see him. ‘Specially no vagrant sailor. Do you even know who you're talking to?”

“Oh, apologizes, mate. I mistook you for a knave,” The stallion said as he took off his hat and placed it on the beam his dinghy was anchored to. He looked at Crackle with an expression that contained a passive lethality. “Now do those ponies deserve those lashes you're giving them or are you more of a degenerate than I originally took you for.”

“Hey.” Crackle advanced a couple of paces, halving the distance between the stallion and himself before stopping, “First of all, fuck you. Second of all, these 'ponies' are slaves.”

The stallion shrugged at that fact, “They're ponies all the same, mate.”

Crackle’s physical advance was not effective, so he tried his verbal skills again. “These pieces of shite are property just as much as the dock you're standing on. Speaking of which, 'mate', if you don't get your flank back on your piss-ant dinghy and sail out of the harbor, I'll be inclined to slit your throat wide.” Crackle was practically seeping with rage. His horn was starting to glow. I was expecting a knife to pop out and slay the stallion right there. But there he stood, defiant of Crackle’s presence.

“Aye. I have no doubt that you will be,” The stallion stuck a hoof up in the air and nonchalantly pointed it back at Crackle, “But do you know there are plenty of stallions out there who would be more than 'inclined' to loosen you up a few pegs. Or have you not visited one of them recently?” A smirk grew on the stallion’s face.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Crackle started to advance additional paces toward the stallion when I saw Risk ran past Rant and I and charged right at him.

“You piece of--?” Risk tackled Crackle down with the force of a buffalo, slamming him down onto the

wooden planks with a sickening thunk. Rant and I watched in horror as Risk began to pound Crackle's head with her hooves. He was squealing in pain with every punch.

"Risk, no! Stop!" Rant pleaded to her sister.

And in a heartbeat, the stallion was on her. He had tackled her off of Crackle and was trying to pin her down. "Take it easy, lass!" The stallion was trying to say. Risk started to kick wildly at him and they both grappled with one another.

"Wh-what?!" That was the only word to come out of my mouth.

"Sweet Luna in the stars, stop it!" Rant shouted at the two.

Risk became frantic. She knew how much bigger the stallion was compared to her. She tried to throw some hoof punches at the stallion's head, which he blocked the majority of. The ones that did connect only served to make the stallion visibly angry. He used what strength he had to get her completely underneath himself. I knew Risk had lost the fight once he had accomplished this.

The stallion then got Risk into a headlock. I could see the fear in her eyes. She then finally realized that it was all over now. Yet she still flailed her limbs around like a mad pony, fighting until the end. The stallion tightened his grip and Risk's body tensed up. She had let one single moan before her oxygen was cut off and she couldn't breathe.

It was over in seconds. Her legs grew limp and she fell onto the dock without any resistance. The stallion released her and got quickly to his feet. He stared directly at me now. Never had my bowels been so close on the verge of bursting everything it had.

I lowered my head to show I meant no harm. Slaves on the ship had been conditioned to do so in order to show submission. However, Rant simply stood there speechless. She was looking at the limp Risk with her mouth agape at the sight of her limp sister.

"Sis..." Rant said, paralyzed.

The stallion relaxed his stance. He must have told himself that the two of us weren't going to make a move on him. He then sighed and gave Rant a sympathetic look. "She'll be fine, lass," he took a moment more for a breath and wiped some sweat off his forehead. "She's a hell of a filly. I'll give her that."

"Mother Celestia..." Crackle whimpered. *He was still alive, damn it.* I could see that he was cringing in lots of pain. "Aw, piss...!"

The stallion slowly walked over and stood above Crackle, tilting his head. "What's broken?" He asked. *Was this stranger about to help him? Weren't they at each other's throat a few seconds ago?* I thought to myself.

"My damn shoulder. AGH, sakes alive!"

"You got any potions on yourself?"

“In the saddlebags, EGH...!” Crackle moaned. Risk must have outright shattered Crackle's shoulder when she tackled him onto the planks. She must have given the tackle her all.

“Aye,” The stallion replied. He shot a glance toward Rant and me. I was standing alone while Rant went over and knelt by Risk, making sure that she was still breathing. After making doubly sure we weren't going anywhere, the stallion started to dig into one of Crackle's saddlebag.

“You're also going to need a splint for that shoulder of yours,” the stallion commented.

“Fuck that I do,” Crackle replied in his usual self-dependent mentality.

“I don't want you to be bitching when you're busy taking me to Lancer about how your arm's broke, and I'm positive that you don't want to be squealing like a foal either. Consider this favor, huh?”

“Fine, fine,” Crackle had given into all the pain and logic, not something he was usually accustomed to. He tried pointing a hoof to show the stallion where the bandages were. “The bandages are in--”

“The saddlebag, aye. I'm seeing it all in here,” The stallion said.

“Ergh...” Crackle closed his eyes. He was completely helpless, totally vulnerable. The stallion still hadn't gotten a potion out yet. *How could it take this long*, I thought.

I looked over at the stallion and watched over his every move. It doesn't take this long to find a potion in Crackle's saddlebag. *I should know*.

The stallion then looked up and we met each others' stare. He smirked, to which I could only tilt my head in embarrassment and confusion. He turned back to the saddlebag and took out a potion and hung it out in front of Crackle's face.

“Drink up, mate,” the stallion said.

“Heh. Thank you,” Crackle said back. I never knew I would ever hear that statement from him. I was perplexed. This was a side of Crackle I had not seen before. He was being thankful for once. Not only that but he was letting a total stranger tend to his wounds. Never once would he be caught in such a weak and yielding position. And yet, here he was. *Pain makes a slave out of any pony*, I thought.

While stuck in mid-thought, the stallion took something else out of the bag and I didn't catch what it was.

“Now, you're going to have to roll over so I make the splint,” the stallion stated plainly.

“Right, right,” the old Crackle snarl came back to life, “quit treating me like a damn newborn.”

Crackle rolled onto his back and went onto his other side. His shoulder was already beginning to swell up, it had become a mix between a red blister and sickish purple bruise.

“Damn,” the stallion said, thoroughly impressed, “She really did put a number on you.”

“She got the drop on me. Never would have bloody happened at all if I saw her coming. I would have

plowed her stupid muzzle in. And, boy, when this leg heals, I'll do just that," Crackle sounded like he was brimming with vengeance. If it wasn't for his handicap, he would be throttling Risk to a worse extent than what the stallion had done. And if Crackle didn't recover soon enough, he would probably have some other pony do it.

And surely Rant would be caught in the thick of it. She would willingly throw herself into the line of fire to save her sister. She would even want to die alongside her. In the end, I would be alone. No doubt that some kind of punishment would await, I could only hope it would be quick.

One apple for three lives. I now realize that stealing that apple was completely not worth it. At the time, my blasted hunger got the better of me. It was the pain that did it, the pain of starving, of going another day without a meal. *Pain makes a slave out of any pony.*

I looked toward the ground in regret. Celestia take me up to great skies above. I don't deserve to live a moment longer. I'm just a thief who has no regard for the lives of his friends. My only friends. Now here they are, waiting for their due appointments with the reaper pony. All I did was help in speeding up the schedule. I wish I could have--

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

SPLASH!

I looked up to see that Crackle wasn't on the dock anymore. The stallion was looking over the edge and as hooves were poking out of the water. It was Crackle's hooves, he was trying to get his head above the water. The stallion sprinted toward me and pushed me onto the dock.

There was one brief shout for help before the dock shook in one big jerk. It was a muffled explosion, shooting water up into the air and showering it all over us and the dock. That was followed by a brief sprinkling of drops tapping on the water's surface. Then there was silence.

The stallion got up off of me and peeked over the edge.

"What in Luna's name was that?" Rant blurted out at the stranger. She was holding her ears which must have been ringing, mine definitely were.

The stallion ignored her, instead he glanced around at the surrounding fog with his ears alert. We must have been farther away from whatever that blast was, as the ringing slowly dissipated into the sounds of the salt water splashing up against the wooden beams. I moved to the edge of the dock to find that a slush of red was floating where Crackle was originally drowning. I looked at this scene for a few moments longer until I realized, *this stranger blew Crackle up!*

"Time to go," the stallion said. I turned around to see that he had put his hat back on and he had ran over to the still unconscious Risk, throwing her over his back.

"Hey, let go of her!" Rant yelled. She was going to go after him but she ended up clapping her ears again and falling over, moaning.

The stallion saw this and then looked at me and said, "Lad. Grab your friend and get her on the boat."

I couldn't register what he had said. I just stood there, unable to move, as I had many times before. I didn't know what to do.

"Lad, look at me!"

I was snapped out of my trance and stared back at him. He had maroon eyes that were of both fierceness and delicacy. His voice demanded attention without being brutal nor unforgiving. In hindsight, he saved us from somepony who was bound to kill us one of these days. I focused on him.

"Trust me," he said. All the world around me seemed to grind to a halt. In the midst of chaos, I had to make a decision that may or may not have been the best but it had to be made all the same. I couldn't think of all the possibilities, of what could possibly happen and what the better options were. I only had what was in front of me: my friends, the dock, and this stranger--and Celestia, if she still deems me valuable enough to save.

A second passed by, and then I made my decision.

I nodded to the stallion and ran to Rant who was struggling to get back onto her hooves. I lifted a leg of hers over my shoulder and began to move her toward the boat.

"Redondo, what are you-- AGH!" Her grip around my neck tightened and I had to pull more of her weight as she was starting to fall back down. Not being the most strongest pony ever meant that I had to rely purely on adrenaline alone to get Rant to the boat.

Just before I was about to tumble inside the dinghy with her, I looked up at the fog around me and thought, *was today really supposed to be a sunny day?*

* * *

About half an hour later, we ended up sailing out of the harbor and went into Horseshoe Bay. Not much was said between any pony on the dinghy. This was due both to the fact that we didn't want to make much noise to attract attention to ourselves and the fact that we were in the dinghy of a stallion who just killed a pony--even if that pony was one of the worst.

Risk had also awoken after we left the harbor, and all of her animalistic rage had left her. The twin sisters embraced yet never spoke to each other or asked the other if they were okay. They needed no words, just the moment.

Still, Rant was constantly aching from the non-stop ringing in her ears, so the stallion offered her painkillers. And after minutes of constant back-and-forth between him and Rant about whether or not she could trust him that the pills wouldn't simply kill her, she took them. She eventually passed out due to the overwhelming amount of excitement we just had. Rant slept on Risk's side, seeing how there wasn't anything else soft to sleep on.

We had been continuing eastward, out of the bay, when the stallion had stopped rowing and looked to the fog with contemplation. He broke the silence by saying, "The bastard had it coming."

"You m-mean, Crackle had it c-c-coming?" I asked.

“Of course, lad. That pony was a prick. What more is there to say?” The stallion said as he leaned up against the end of the dinghy.

I didn't know how to respond. While I did agree with him, I was still shocked by the nature in which these events had all occurred. I looked over at Risk and she just sat there, petting Rant's head and occasionally scouting out the fog for dangers. She was paying this conversation no mind--at least, she was trying not to.

No matter, a flurry of questions had spawned inside of me and I had to unleash them. However, my stutter followed suit, “Wh-wh-why did he have it coming? And if he did, why d-d-didn't you just let Risk k-kill him? She could have done it, she--”

I saw Risk shoot a death glare at me. I squeaked and took that as a hint to stop talking, slumping into my seat. I should have remembered that Risk loathed anypony to speak for her--except for Rant, of course. I thought about shutting my mouth for good then and there, considering that I had done enough to harm to my friends to last the rest of their lives.

The stallion saw this but chose not to comment on it. Instead, he leaned forward and looked at me curiously. “Because, lad, there's a difference between a slave killing a pony and a pirate killing a pony,” he said.

“Well, that doesn't mean that--” I was in the middle of saying until my brain finally recognized that one word he said: pirate.

“W-w-w-wait. You're a pirate?!” I jumped in my seat.

Risk turned to the stallion, not with the same terrified expression as I but with a curious raised eyebrow.

The stallion stood up, took off his hat and bowed. “Shady Sands of the Wildstyle, at your service.”

I knew what that ship, the Wildstyle, was. I knew what her crew was notorious for doing: pillaging and plundering all along the eastern Equestrian seaboard. Any ship was fair game to their cannons and cutlasses.

Shady Sands. I couldn't be anymore terrified at hearing that name. For that was the name of the ship's captain. And here he was, standing before me. No lawbringers or vigilantes have brought this stallion to justice. Most seafarers surrender willingly whenever they see his ship on the horizon, lest they want to worst to happen to them.

And it was at this time that the fog began to evaporate, the sky began to be filled with the colors of the sunrise. Which reminded me of that promise the wind gave me earlier this morning: *a bright and sunny day was yet to come*. I looked east and there it was, Celestia's sweet sun peaking over the Coltic Sea and giving the land life through light. A onshore breeze touched my cheek and flew through my mane. *What does this all mean*, I thought in disbelief. *Is this good luck or an omen?*

“Aye. Looks like it's going to be a bright and sunny day, doesn't it?” Shady commented.

I felt my spine shiver when he said that. This pirate said the exact words my mind thought that wind was telling. No matter how coincidental that may have been, it indoubtably unsettled me. *Was I going*

mad?

I had to think of something else to say. I felt like a tiny rabbit in front of a manticore. So I shifted my eyes back to him and began to stutter out nonsense. At least, at the time, it was the best nonsense I could come up with, “D-do you realize that you’re st-st-stealing from Lancer Blackgold?!”

“Aye,” Shady replied, “but being on the high seas, I’ve realized a lot of things, lad.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a steel cylinder case. The case had a symbol on it, a gold bar and lance perpendicular to each other inside of a circle. That was Lancer’s seal and cutie mark. He opened an end of the case and let three scrolls of paper fall out onto his hoof. He then tossed the case overboard.

He rolled out the scrolls onto his seat and began to read them. He then looked at me and asked, “Redondo, is it?”

I nodded my head. “Yes,” I replied.

“You were the ship’s helmsman?”

I started to panic at the thought that he had taken our slave papers from Crackle while he was looking in his saddlebag. “Yes, sir,” I said nonetheless, trying not to look completely petrified.

“And Risk and Rant here worked the mainsails?”

Rant didn’t acknowledge him, she just simply looked down at her sister and stroked her mane.

I had to answer for her. “Yes, they do,” I said.

“No wonder why you were treated with such grace. By the way, I overheard what that babbling maniac was saying before I rowed up on the scene.”

So he was in the fog the entire time, just waiting for a chance to cause mayhem? That’s a comforting thought.

“Also, you’re in the wrong tense, Redondo,” Shady said as he shook his head and crumpled up the scrolls of paper into wads. “They ‘did’ work for Lancer’s mainsails. They no longer do.”

“Wh-what?” I asked with my mouth wide open. “How can y-y-you say such a thing? Are you st-stealing us from him? Lancer’s our master!”

At that moment, Shady took the wads of paper into his hooves and swiftly threw them into the water.

“Wha--”

“Now the ocean’s your master, lad” he said as he leaned against the end of dinghy again. “Oh, and don’t look now but my mates are coming to pick us up now,” he raised a hoof and pointed off in the distance toward a sailing frigate heading in our direction.

It had black sails and its wood was that of a darkened bark with red painted trims around its many cannon openings in both its front and sides. A flag was raised up the mast, it was of a pony’s skull with

two bones making the shape of an 'x' behind it. The entire presence of that ship screamed of chaos and death, and it was heading straight for us.

"I... I... I..." was the only thing that was coming out of my mouth. My very life and existence had changed in the matter of a single morning. I never knew what it was like to be free, if you could call this 'being free.' I was absolutely frightened and confused and with nowhere to go. Is this what it's like to be free, I thought to myself.

Shady only sighed and peered at sky as I was about to start hyperventilating. Risk paid me no mind and was busy tending to Rant. I was with three other ponies, two of which were my friends, and I have never felt so alone.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh..." I was trying to ask Celestia why this was happening, when Shady interrupted my plea for salvation.

"Do you know about Shady Sands' Shuffle, lad?"

"The what...?" I asked back. I wasn't at first able to articulate what he said due to the overwhelming sense of doom that had overwhelmed my mind.

"Shady Sands' Shuffle. Well, I should I really call it 'my' shuffle since--"

"Shady Sands' Shuffle?" I repeated saying the name.

"Aye," Shady chuckled. "Though, it's patented. Which actually entails that you owe me ten caps."

"T-t-ten caps?"

Was the captain of the Wildstyle, the most feared pirate vessel in the east, trying to scam me for cash? I was utterly dumbfounded. Wasn't this stallion supposed to be the scourge of the seas, not just some cheapskate?

"One of the rules is: unless you've done the shuffle yourself, you have to pay to use the name."

"Th-th-there are rules?! What kind of craziness is that?"

"Want me to recite all of them?"

I shook my head, still flabbergasted. "What is Shady Sands' Shuffle anyway?" The utter rubbish of the situation was actually starting to get me mad. *What so-called 'shuffle' in all of Celestia's green earth could possibly so grand that you would have pay caps in order to--*

"Twenty caps, you owe me now."

Oh, right. Bugger me, I cursed myself.

Shady sat there with a smile of triumph while I straightened up in my seat and tried to look at him with what's left of my dignity--and sanity. A few moments passed before Shady deemed it long enough for the shame to have sunken into my soul before continuing on.

“It’s what did in that Crackle of yours,” he started off saying. “It takes a little bit of pickpocketing, a little bit of luck, and a whole lot of finesse.”

“I d-d-don’t understand,” I said. Truly, I had no idea what he was talking about.

“It’s called a ‘shuffle’ for a reason,” he said as he pulled out a healing potion and held it out in front of him.

“It’s not about what you’re taking away from the poor bastard,” Shady reached into another one of his coat pockets and pulled out a grenade, holding it with his other hoof. “It’s about what you’re giving ‘em as replacement.”

End.

Time Flows and Trust Grows

By Starlight Tinker

Quod verum est, in numeros. The truth lies in numbers. Unlike philosophy or divination, the study of statistics, sampled properly and analysed correctly, can allow us to predict the outcome of any scenario with an eerie measure of clarity. Take for example the following, a well known thought experiment proposed by amniomorphic spell pioneer Starswirl the Bearded.

Consider that pillar of Equestrian society, the concept of trustworthiness. As an initial premise, we may surmise that there are those amongst the general populace who are not worthy, in a general sense, of our trust (hence the existence of the concept as a recognisable state of being - it would not exist as such if it were an immutable constant). With that as a basis, we can then state that, of all the creatures ever to walk upon this fair land, only a finite, non-unity, non-zero proportion will ever be trustworthy to any real extent. Of that number, only a finite, non-unity, non-zero proportion will be proximate at an appropriate time to he or she who is in need of a trustworthy ally. Of that number, only a finite, non-unity, non-zero proportion of scenarios will exist in which the trustworthiness of the subject may be maintained or guaranteed throughout a given interaction. And of that number, only a finite, non-unity, non-zero proportion will remain trustworthy for a sufficient length of time in the face of worldly temptation and strife for the interaction to begin in the first place. Finally, one must factor in the probability of the analyst themselves being trustworthy, subject to the environmental variables described above (which, of course, may be represented by a finite, non-unity, non-zero fraction). By summarily multiplying these fractions by one another, the analyst is left with the mean probability of a random, sentient creature being trustworthy at some arbitrary time for some arbitrary purpose.

Disconcertingly enough, the result of this thought experiment, even with the most optimistic estimates, does not produce a non-negligible probability. It teaches us that, statistically speaking, you can't trust anypony...

- Statistical Analysis for Eggheads, 13th edition, Canterlot University Press

'I could've told you that...' mused Calibre, as he lazily hoofed through the ancient, blackened textbook.

A light breeze caught the edge of the tome's decrepit pages, ruffling them gently as the earth pony's eyes continued to scan the book's contents. It certainly wasn't the best purchase he had ever made, that

was for sure. If and when that blasted trader made it back to Trotfell, the first thing Calibre was going to do was get his caps back.

In the distance, a shot suddenly rang out across the Wasteland. Calibre's ears perked up immediately and his head snapped to the direction of the sound, his eyes keenly scanning the horizon for trouble. His perch atop Trotfell's tallest guard tower afforded him an excellent view of the plane around the town, and he was quickly able to discern the tell-tale crimson flash of laser weapons in the distance. He rose from his position on the floor of the tower and grabbed his rifle, flipping the safety catch to the 'OFF' position before settling down into his markspony's stance.

Through the scope of the sniper rifle, Calibre was able to make out two pegasus ponies with a small sky wagon being set upon by a much larger force of raiders. They were still quite far off, so he couldn't see their faces, but he *was* able to surmise that they weren't wearing body armour, and were instead outfitted with smart (and almost entirely untarnished) Enclave flight suits - a sure sign of the do-gooders of the new 'Volunteer Corps.' he had been hearing so much about lately.

The group had been turning up in conversations all over Equestria, seemingly the Grand Pegasi Enclave's way of 'reconnecting' with the poor, downtrodden ponies of the surface world. Calibre was dubious of these apparent intentions, so much so that he would often advise his acquaintances (for he had no friends to speak of) to avoid contact with them outright, regardless of whatever 'help' they seemed to be offering.

He continued to regard the scene playing out before his scope. The pegasi were holding their own against the raiders, deftly dodging their poorly coordinated attempts at bringing the pair down. More red flashes merged with the pale glow of the late afternoon sky, and no less than three of the raiders dropped to the ground clutching smoking wounds on their hides. Calibre felt one of his eyebrows rise slightly as his opinion of the pegasi as combatants rose further and further. These two were fighting like no ponies he had ever seen! It was as if they had some sort of cause to fight for; as if they *had* to win or all would be lost forever. Why they didn't just ditch the wagon and fly away, he had no idea. Calibre silently thought about what could possibly be so important, and was running through possibilities in his head when a stern, authoritative voice grabbed his attention from behind.

"Calibre!" shouted Sage, the mayor of Trotfell, as he galloped out onto the landing of the tower. "What's going on!? Are we under attack!?"

"Not quite, sir," Calibre responded languidly, running his tongue around his mouth in an expression of disinterest. "Looks like that there 'Volunteer' lot have bit off more than they can chew. I have to say though, they're doing pretty well for a bunch of flappers."

"The Volunteer Corps?" said Sage, his eyes widening in surprise. "They've never come to this region before! This could be an attempt to open trade or diplomatic relations with the North. We should help them!"

At that, Sage rounded on his elderly - although still entirely functional - hooves and started quickly towards the staircase back to ground level.

"I'll round up the duty guards! Cover them, Calibre!" Sage shouted over his shoulder as he disappeared down the stairs.

'What!?' Calibre gawked internally. 'Cover them!? We haven't a clue who they are or what they want! We can't just treat them as if—'

His monologue was interrupted mid-sentence by a sudden piercing scream coming from the direction of the conflict. As Calibre pressed his eye up to his scope again he saw a bulky, pastel-coloured streak falling towards the ground, quickly followed by a far more coordinated swathe of lime green. One of the pegasi had been hit, causing both them and the sky wagon they were hauling to hurtle towards the Earth. Their companion, still in control of his or her flight, was risking a head-on collision with the ground in order to arrest the other's fall (or to save the wagon - at this point Calibre wasn't sure which would be worth more to them).

A small, uncomfortable pang of sadness worked its way onto Calibre's face as he unconsciously lined up one of the remaining raiders in the sight of his rifle. He was experiencing a sensation not entirely unlike regret at not acting sooner; an uncharacteristic emotion which was entirely failing to sit right with him. And, if that wasn't worrying enough, the subsequent explosion of the raider's head did absolutely nothing to alter his feelings.

Three subsequent - and equally lethal - gunshots rang out across the blighted tundra, cleaving flesh from bone and separating the raiders from their mortal existence as Calibre put his skills as an expert markspony to good use. An almighty crash resounded a moment later, just as he was about to dispatch the penultimate assailant, and he quickly turned his scope toward it. To his dismay (and surprise), he realised that he was looking at the spattered remains of the wagon pilot and their companion, both of whom had apparently been killed while saving the enchanted container from smashing against the ground. Gritting his teeth in a turgid combination of bewilderment and rage, Calibre fired twice more, neatly puncturing the final two raider's heads.

Their corpses flopped to the ground just as Sage's contingent of guards arrived at the scene. Calibre could make out Caring Heart, Trotfell's youngest doctor, and two nurses attending to the crashed pegasi while the guards poked and prodded at the raider's bodies, examining his hoofwork, and ensuring that they had nothing else planned for the day.

'Why did they die for that wagon!?' Calbre asked himself as he continued to peer through the telescopic sight affixed to his rifle. 'They could have just ditched it and escaped! What the hell would be so import—'

Before the thought could finish crossing his mind, Calibre noticed a sudden change in the assembled group of ponies surrounding the sky wagon. All at once, they whipped their heads toward the downed vehicle, and Sage made a beeline for the cracked hatch on its side, pulling it open savagely as he reached it. Calibre peered intently into his lens, willing the scope's magnification factor to increase as Sage buried his head in the wagon's interior. A moment later, he emerged with a light blue bundle of fabric held securely in his teeth, and immediately motioned for Caring Heart to attend him. Those present proceeded to cluster around the strange package, their heads bowed in expressions of intense interest as Calibre once again began to clench his jaw in frustration at having his view obscured.

After what seemed like an eternity of waiting, the cluster of ponies finally dispersed, allowing Caring Heart and Sage to begin galloping like equines possessed back towards the Trotfell gates. Calibre refocussed his scope, following the pair with the smooth, practised motions of a seasoned sniper. They drew closer with every passing second, and it wasn't long before Calibre could make out what it was that Trotfell's mayor and doctor were carrying.

Calibre's eyes widened in shock and his heart dropped into his gut as the image of the bundle was finally resolved. There, in Caring Heart's motherly embrace, was a scared and newly orphaned pegasus foal.

5 YEARS LATER...

Calibre let out a gentle breath as he squeezed the rifle trigger set between his jaws. A thunderous shudder resonated throughout his body as a single high velocity round left the weapon's barrel, but he was too used to the sensation to be phased by it. A full six hundred yards away, a single bloatsprite suddenly exploded into a puss-green cloud of goop, and Calibre gently relaxed the strong, resilient muscles of his shoulders as he rose from his stance.

"Whoa!" cooed the bright blue pegasus filly beside him, as she pulled a pair of well-used binoculars away from her face. "That was amazing! Where'd you learn to shoot like that!?"

"Practice," Calibre shrugged, as he flipped the safety catch back into the 'ON' position. "By the time I'm done with you kid, I expect you to be able manage that too."

"By the time you're done with me?" the little filly repeated, cocking her head to one side. "You mean you're gonna teach me how to shoot!? But I don't even have a real gun! All I've got is one of those rubbish old BB rifles."

"Who's been teaching you English?" Calibre asked, as he busied himself with an old footlocker secured to the floor of the guard tower's upper platform. "'Cos they're not doing a very good job - you're getting your tenses mixed up."

"Huh?" replied the filly, now thoroughly confused. "What's a 'tense'?"

"You said you don't have a real gun," Calibre responded, grasping a crudely wrapped object with his forelegs. "What you should have said was that you *didn't* have a real gun."

The filly's eyes widened to a pair of adorable, glittering orbs, full of anticipation and wonderment as Calibre's intent became apparent.

"You mean...!?" she gasped, her words brimming with excitement.

"Yep," replied Calibre, as he hoofed the parcel over to the tiny mare. "Happy birthday, Moon."

"Oh my gosh!" cried Moon Shadow, as she tore at the salvaged, two-hundred year old wrapping paper surrounding Calibre's present. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

A matter of seconds later, Moon was hungrily taking in every single little feature of her 'new' .22 calibre rifle, from the weld around the ironsight to the action of the firing bolt. When he was sure she wouldn't notice, Calibre allowed himself the slightest of smiles at the filly's delight, and was almost able to eclipse the deep guilt that he still held in his heart.

The last five years had been a challenge for Calibre. The choice he had made on the day of Moon's orphaning had haunted him ever since, and he was reminded every single day that, had he shown some concern for the Volunteer Corps. ponies in distress and acted sooner, Moon Shadow might still have her parents, and wouldn't be confined to the surface world.

As it was though, the unfortunate little pegasus had been denied her mother and father, and the Corps. had never set hoof nor wing in Trottingham since.

Calibre shivered as he regarded the pastel blue filly in front of him. Despite the pure, tangible joy that her young heart was revelling in, he was still inexorably reminded of the horrific three hour period that followed the incident all those years ago. He had laid there, frozen atop the guard tower, tears streaming down his face at the tragedy he had just had a hoof in. A tumultuous, angry sort of sadness gripped him until Sage, having noticed Calibre's absence from the town below, had ventured up the guard tower to find him.

"Well," Calibre said briskly, as he tried in vain to snap himself out of his mood "shall we get in some target practice then?"

"Aw, yeah!" Moon cried, as she flopped onto the floor, readying her new weapon with all the skill of a seasoned BB gun specialist and all the grace of a dead swan.

Calibre smiled once again at her boundless enthusiasm as he settled himself beside her, putting his own gun to one side and picking up the binoculars. He began to scan the horizon, acting as the young filly's spotter, and quickly zeroed in on the targets he wanted her to focus on.

"Oh, my!" he said loudly after a moment of silence. "Looks like there're some raiders on the prowl! Check your one o'clock, Moon! Quickly! Before they get away!"

"Raiders!?" the happy little markspony squealed, joining in the game. "Where!?! They won't get past me!"

"Your one o'clock," repeated Calibre. "Remember? We talked about giving combat directions using a clock face?"

"Uh..." Moon droned uncertainly. "Was that the one where it's like time, but it's really not time? Like where to look? 'Cos I never really got—"

"That way," Calibre grumbled, as he nudged the barrel of her rifle toward the correct bearing.

"Oh," the filly replied, her cheeks flushing with bubblegum-hued embarrassment. "Yeah. Right. I-I knew that..."

Moon adjusted her tiny, skinny shoulders, settling into the position she had observed the town's snipers assume so many times before. Her eyes narrowed to slits and her tongue began to peek out onto her top lip as she focussed her mind on steadying the rifle.

"H-hey!" she suddenly exclaimed, as her eyes followed Calibre's directions. "There really *is* something out there!"

"Is there now?" the older buck responded, chuckling to himself. "Well, then... you'd better shoot it before it gets too close to the town, hadn't you?"

"Yessir!" Moon replied, as she slammed a magazine into her rifle, locking the firing bolt in place with a flourish and taking the trigger enthusiastically into her mouth. No more than two seconds elapsed before gunshots began to noisily pierce the otherwise quiet Wasteland afternoon. Bullets ricocheted off of buckets and embedded themselves in scavenged timbers as Moon defended Trotfell against the ravenous oncoming hoard of fenceposts that Calibre had assembled for her.

"Yeah, that's it!" he shouted proudly, as Moon scored body hit after body hit, mortally wounding what could have potentially been a dozen murderous raiders. "Good girl, Moon. Remember though, you should always try for a headshot. In a combat situation, dispatching an opponent quickly is often the key to vic—"

"What's 'dispatching' mean?" the little pegasus asked without turning her head, cleanly cleaving Calibre's rhetoric in two as she continued to expend ammunition.

"Fancy word for killing," Calibre responded (after sighing heavily and rolling his eyes in frustration). "You can use it for talking about mail as well. You know, sending things places? But, mostly it's a fancy word for poppin' somepony."

"Okay," Moon replied, quickly busying herself once more with her imaginary guard duties.

Calibre caught himself staring at the little mare as she continued to attack the targets he had set up for her. She was falling into a competent rhythm, firing more accurately and reloading quicker with every repetition. The old markspony couldn't help but flush with pride as his diminutive protégé improved before his very eyes.

2 YEARS LATER...

"One for you!" Moon said to herself triumphantly, as a bucket-head was launched into the air. A cool breeze meandered gently across the guard platform as the sniper's student began to line up her next shot.

Calibre sat back on his haunches, electing to not observe his student directly, his confidence in her abilities matched only by his pride in her development. He looked out instead over the wall of the guard tower, watching as Moon expertly punctured the myriad of objects just beyond Trotfell's East gate. Since first assembling the small target range two years previously, Calibre had expanded and improved it at every opportunity, incorporating refuse and salvaged raider barding to make the targets more realistic for his promising young apprentice.

In the comparatively short time between that moment and his first meeting her, Calibre had developed a relationship with Moon Shadow that was deeper and happier than any he had ever had before. He spent the majority of his spare time doting on her as if she were his own child, imparting worldly wisdom here and heartfelt gifts there. The firing range was the first of his presents of course (and was now used by practically everypony for target practice), but there had been others along the way. They included combat barding that Calibre had personally hoof stitched (although he'd rather shoot you than admit to picking up the tools of seamstress) and a firing mechanism for her rifle so well preserved that it would have fetched more than his annual guard's salary if openly traded.

"One for you!" Moon repeated, accomplishing another feat of ballistic accuracy only seconds later.

"How's your father?" Calibre asked quietly, as Moon continued her practice. "I haven't seen him in a few days."

"Oh, he's okay," Moon replied, without so much as a twitch of her rifle. "He's trying to deal with all the increased raider activity in the area, so I haven't seen much of him recently."

"Yeah..." mused Calibre. "They're getting bolder every day. How many hits are you at now, Moon?"

"Thirty-seven," the filly replied.

"And misses?" asked Calibre.

"Nadda," Moon smirked.

"Good girl," Calibre replied, smiling as he checked the sun's progress through the cloud layer. "I think we can call that a successful day's practice. How about you take one more to empty the chamber and we can go get some grub?"

Moon Shadow tutted in annoyance as her session was called to a close, but knew all too well what would be in store for her if she made a fuss. Calibre may have been a great teacher, and her father a kind and caring leader, but by Celestia were they scary when you crossed them!

She released the magazine from her gun and, as was customary during her training sessions, lined up one last shot in order to expend the final round in the rifle's firing chamber. Moon spotted the furthest target she could make out on the range: a brand new rust-red raider mannequin that was swaying wildly in the wind. She wondered for a moment why she hadn't noticed it before, but forgot the thought as soon as she brought the scope up to her eye.

"And one for—" she began, stopping mid sentence as her disproportionately large eyes widened to impossible saucers. "C-Calibre? Why's that one moving like that?"

"Hmm?" Calibre responded, as he pulled his own eyes away from Moon and returned them to the binoculars. "What do you mean moving? I don't see any— Wh-what the hell!?"

The pair turned to gawk briefly at one another, the difference in their ages forgotten and any semblance of formality dismissed as the scene before them played itself out.

A hundred feet below the guard tower platform, a single equine figure was falling over his own hooves, half dazed as he tried in vain to stay upright. It looked as if he - whoever 'he' was - had travelled the length of the world, and had only just then decided to take a rest, allowing his fatigue to totally overtake him as he slumped and wobbled repeatedly into Calibre's improvised target range.

"I-it's a colt!" Calibre said to no pony in particular as he looked through the binoculars at it. "He's a big lad, but he's definitely a young 'un. Looks like he's carrying a pump-action, and nothing else besides."

"Wh-what's wrong with his hide?" Moon asked, her voice wavering as she held onto her new rifle for dear life. "I-it looks like he's... He's..."

"Covered in blood..." Calibre whispered as he slowly dropped the binoculars to the floor of the platform. "He's soaked head to hoof in it..."

Calibre had never gotten on well with foals. Moon was an exception of course, but even between the two fast friends - whom the other guards had taken to calling 'the sniper and the sci-fi buff' - there had still been profound moments of tension. Sometimes Calibre would say something that wasn't meant for a child's ear, and sometimes Moon would overstep her bounds as the markspony's apprentice. Regardless of what brought them about though, there were always moments where it would become clear to everypony in earshot, that Calibre still had a long way to go when it came to kids.

So, dear reader, you can imagine his discomfort and distress at seeing one so young, smeared with the arterial spray of at least a half a dozen other ponies, and falling over himself with fatigue, naught but two hundred yards from what, as far as he was concerned, was the safest place in the world.

A jarring mechanical clunk popped Calibre's bubble of introspection as Moon slammed a fresh magazine into her gun. He watched silently, his brow furrowed with discontent as the now practised apprentice silently brought the rifle to her shoulder and took in a breath. Calibre knew all too well that that deliberate, stable inhalation was the death knell for the pony down below. The next time Moon's lungs moved, she would exhale, and in so doing would squeeze the trigger of her rifle with her lower jaw, firing with absolute precision a sharpened, aerodynamically styled shard of hot metal straight into the colt's skull.

Calibre turned his head, his perception of the world around him having slowed to a visceral crawl, and looked at the colt below.

Something was wrong with this. He *knew* it. Deep in his gut, he felt the rumblings of another tragedy taking hold.

Calibre had taught Moon everything he knew about guarding a settlement in the Equestrian Wasteland, and it was finally beginning to show. His failure to defend her parents had led to him adopting the age-old mantra 'shoot first, ask questions later' (although, given the way he had taught Moon, 'shoot first, shoot second, and only then think about asking questions' might have been a more appropriate summary of his leanings).

In one single, dark moment of enlightenment, Calibre felt his heart shudder as a humongous weight of realisation settled upon his shoulders. In that morbid, shining instant, all of his questions were answered, and all of his fears were confirmed.

He realised with horror that it was all his fault.

Calibre had worked hard to right his mistake of yesteryear, namely his failing to fire his weapon when it was needed the most, and had set about making sure that it would never be repeated, going so far as to take Moon on as his apprentice. He was resolute that she would never know the agony he had known those seven years earlier.

But alas, in his zealous pursuit of righting his own wrongs he had overcompensated, priming Moon to mar her young life with a whole new disaster. He had taught her to shoot, shoot and shoot again until all was silent and dead, totally disregarding the lesson that he should have learned on that fateful day; the lesson he had only just understood a whole *seven years* later!

It was all about trust. That implied, unspoken, built-in trust that a broken society like Equestria needed so desperately.

Why were the Volunteer Corps. ponies so close to Trotfell when they were attacked? Answer: Because they had flown *towards* Trotfell so that the settlement's guards could cover them! They had trusted that the sniper on duty - Calibre - would help them in their time of need!

And he had failed, completely and utterly, to do so.

But what about this colt? This crazy, shambling, blood soaked colt? This poor kid with his raider's shotgun shell cutie mark on his flank, the end of a jet high ringing around inside his head and the entrails of his most recent victims caked all over his hide. Why was he there? Why had he wandered so close to a settlement like Trotfell?

Was it really jet? Was he just another doped up raider who'd scored a hit after a massacre and followed the pink dragon to his doom?

Or was there something more? Could it have been that he had seen Trotfell in the distance and *trusted* that in his wounded, desperate state its residents would aid him? Could it be that there was another side to his story and that, by some miracle, *he* was a survivor of some sort of massacre?

It didn't matter either way, really. Because Calibre couldn't take that chance.

The world sped up again as Moon's lungs began to contract, resulting in the tightening of her jaw. With a motion worthy of an old Hong-Pong style martial arts play, Calibre swept his foreleg out towards Moon, deftly smacking the barrel of her rifle just as she pulled the trigger. The round ricocheted once off of the guard tower's ceiling, and twice more off of the walls, before it finally came to rest.

Moon turned to her mentor, her eyes morphing into fiery, accusatory pools as she roared at him.

"What are doing!?" she thundered without respect. "I was about to bag my first raider! Now he might — C-Calibre...? Calibre!? What's wrong!?"

Calibre had been staring his diminutive student down evenly for several seconds, not quite ready to defend his actions, when he suddenly noticed how unbelievably tired he was. He felt as if he had just run a hundred miles - his breathing was laboured and his head was beginning to pound, as if somepony were tightly pressing against his temples with their hooves. He stumbled backwards, falling onto the guard tower floor as Moon galloped to his side. She was crying, Calibre noticed, and when she spoke her voice was muffled somehow, as if his ears weren't working properly.

'What's happening...?' Calibre wondered to himself as his vision began to blur. 'Why am I...? Oh... Is that why...?'

As he focussed on Moon's tear-streamed face, Calibre became aware of the myriad of colours playing and dancing in his field of vision. Of course there were the dark, greyish tones of the guard tower and the filthy glow of the sky. And, of course, there were the pleasing, baby-blue tones he associated so warmly with Moon Shadow, and the wondrous, pale silver that made up her eyes. But all of those stimuli fell to the wayside of Calibre's considerations when he noticed the newest colour to be thrust upon his eyes' palette.

Red. He was covered in red. Deep, dark, foreboding red, black like death and yet warm with life. He sleepily swept his hoof over his chest as Moon darted to the speech tube attached to the platform's lip. Calibre heard what sounded like loud, shouted syllables being barked into the tarnished brass cone on the end of the pipe as he drew his foreleg back and forth across his hide. The texture was entirely new and altogether wrong - all wet and sticky. Maybe it was treacle? Or maybe it had something to do with the hole. The new one. In his back. The hole that he didn't remember being there before.

Maybe the two pegasi would know. Maybe they'd recognise him from before and help him to find out where all the red was coming from? Calibre was glad when they remembered him, but he found it hard to ask them his question, or indeed to form any coherent thoughts at all.

Moon had vanished now. And so had the guard tower. Even the red worries were drifting away. All that remained were the two smiling, gratitude-laden faces of the pegasi, and a hushed whiteness all around.

Calibre felt his face stretch into a smile as he sighed for the last time. Somehow, he knew that - in the end, at least - he had done well.

24 HOURS LATER...

Moon Shadow sat atop the guard tower alone, her rifle in pieces on the floor as she cradled a far older weapon in her hooves. She was still crying heavily, shuddering slightly with every emotionally agonising breath as a shadowy figure silently ascended the guard tower.

"I thought I'd find you here," said Sage, as gently as he could manage.

Moon slowly looked up towards her adoptive father, allowing the waning moonlight to catch the wet, salty trails that ran underneath her eyes. Her lower lip trembled as the elder buck's soft, empathy laden eyes took her and her sorrow in.

"K-keep away!" Moon said, her voice quivering, as her father moved to take a step forward. "I'll only hurt you if you come too close!"

"I don't think you will," Sage replied simply, as he sat down on the platform floor. "You're not the type, Mo."

"B-but I am!" Moon shouted, fresh tears flowing from her eyes. "I killed Calibre! I did that! And now I'm never going to see him ag—!"

"That's enough," Sage said quietly, his tone conveying all of the required authority. Moon closed her mouth with a wince, and hugged Calibre's rifle tightly as Sage moved closer to her despite her warning.

"I don't think you're a killer, Mo," Sage said softly. "And Calibre's gone because he didn't want anypony to die unnecessarily today."

"Wh-what do you m-mean...?" Moon asked, her voice wavering with every syllable.

"I'm talking about the colt you were about to shoot," Sage said. "He wasn't a raider. In fact I think he had just *survived* a run in with them."

"You mean you brought him inside!?" Moon screamed, as she rose to her hooves, momentarily towering over her father. "He could have been anything! A raider! A slaver! A cannibal! And you just let him in!? What were you thinking!? What would Calibre have died for if he had been dangerous!?"

Sage looked up at his daughter, a harsh expression of disappointment upon his face.

"Are you finished?" he asked quietly, causing Moon to shrink back to her regular size.

"I-if he hadn't..." she began, her voice having been reduced to a whisper. "If he hadn't appeared... C-Calibre might still be a-alive..."

"Yes, that's true," Sage replied. "But he did, and if Calibre hadn't acted, that colt would now be dead, and you would have an innocent's blood on your hooves for the rest of your life."

Moon hid her face in her hooves, her shoulders shuddering with new sobs as she retreated to the corner of the platform.

"What happened today was important," Sage continued, as he moved to sit beside Moon, "Did Calibre ever tell you why he was so fond of you?"

"N-no..." Moon said, wiping tears from her eyes with her foreleg.

"He was the sniper on duty when your birth parents were killed," Sage said. "He failed to save them, and took it upon himself to put it right by helping to raise you."

"R-really...?" Moon asked helplessly, as fresh tears welled up under her eyes. "Th-that just makes me miss him more!"

"I know, Mo..." Sage cooed as he took the little filly into his embrace. "It's okay, love. It's okay. I'm not saying all this to upset you. I'm saying it because you need to understand how wonderful today truly was."

"Wh-what!?" Moon screeched angrily, as her outraged little forelegs pushed her father away. "Wonderful!? H-how could you say something like that!?"

"Because it's true," Sage replied, a measure of genuine, teary passion working its way into his voice. "Calibre taught you to fight; to eliminate every and any threat as soon as it reared its head. But the one thing he never thought to teach you was when *not* to fight. Don't you see, Mo? He gave his life so you could be a better pony, so you could learn the lesson that he spent years learning!"

Moon didn't move or make a sound for several minutes, her eyes fixed to the floor as she considered her father's wisdom. After a long silence Sage rose to his hooves with a sigh, and began to trot slowly towards the tower's staircase.

"Make of Calibre's actions what you will," he said, just before he began to descend the stairs. "But I still think what he did was pretty wonderful."

With that, the silver-maned buck climbed down off of the platform, leaving only Moon atop the tower.

She blinked once, as she continued to process everything she had just learned, and slowly began to raise her head. Her eyes landed on the scattered components of her destroyed .22 rifle, spread out across the platform.

She blinked once more, and silently began to gather the pieces together, screwing, clicking and latching them all back into position. A few minutes passed, and soon Moon was once again holding the rifle that Calibre had so proudly given her. With an entirely neutral expression on her face, she slung the weapon over her neck and onto her back, and began to make her way down to the town below.

By the time she made it to the ground, Moon had made a decision. She decided that she would never again ascend the guard tower. Nor would she ever take on guard duty. If there was ever a threat to her town, or her father, or anypony she loved, she would deal with it. But not with her rifle trigger between her teeth.

She looked back up at Trotfell's tallest tower, and sighed as the moonlight caught the barrel of Calibre's rifle, propped up against the platform wall for all to see. With an enlivening breath, Moon nodded to herself, and sent a short, yet entirely heartfelt prayer to the Goddesses on Calibre's behalf.

At that, she turned her back on the tower, and made her way toward Trotfell's hospital, intent on meeting this strange, shotgun-wielding colt from the North. Her resolve hardened with every hoofstep, and the little filly quickly broke into a confident and rejuvenating gallop.

At the ripe old age of eight, Moon Shadow vowed to never again let the fear of others drive her to violence. She would trust them, and she would love them, and she would make sure that they could never harm her.

Because at that point they would no longer be her enemies. They would be her friends.

Unity: Warmth

By thatguyvex

The smoke choked and burned in Softmane's lungs as she frantically ran on her tiny foal legs. Tears spilled from the unicorn filly's eyes, the wide orbs a dirty mud brown color that matched her coat, though by now that coat was so covered in soot she was practically black. Her short messy gray mane was plastered to her head in wet, sweat soaked tangles, mixed with red from the blood of a nasty cut across her brow.

She didn't know where she was going, only that her mother had told her to run, and she was too scared and confused to do anything other than what she was told. She ignored the screaming and cracking echoes of gunshots. She ignored the pleading and cries of pain interspersed with hacking laughter and high pitched cackles of glee. She ignored the blood she slipped in, face planting in the viscera of a pony whose lower half was missing.

Oh Goddesses, is that Mrs. Patio!? No, don't look, father said run!

Softmane stepped around the body, too shocked to even feel properly sick at the sight. She was simply numb all over. Again her mother's words spurred her on; run! Down the street she went, stumbling on her tiny legs, her mouth hanging open from constantly drawing in ragged breaths. Black curls of smoke washed over her path like a river, choking her as she ran through it. She heard horrible screaming to her right, seeing the smoke billowing from Mr. and Mrs. Happy Hour's tavern, which was alive with fire. The screaming was from inside, and for a horrible instant Softmane saw Peach Cream, the serving mare, crawling out of the tavern door. Peach Cream's body was charred black, only a few patches of her once clean pink coat still visible. Softmane didn't slow her run, too terrified to try and help, tears streaming down her face.

The edge of town was just ahead, the black fence of thick forest surrounding the town visible through the haze of smoke. Maybe she'd hide among the trees? But what would she do, even after the bad ponies went away? Surely her mother would come find her? These thoughts were like the last bubbles of hope rising amid the filly's drowning fears. Hope that gave a little extra strength to her numb, tired legs.

She felt something snap around her hind legs, sending her painfully tumbling end over end, and leaving her face down in the mud. As she coughed, trying to get her breath back, wondering what had hit her, she heard an awful screeching laugh from behind her. The laugh was interspersed with hacking coughs, and Softmane felt a rough hoof kick her over.

"Close, little one, close, but I'm afraid it just isn't your day," said the Raider, a bright orange mare with bloodshot brown eyes and a grime strewn black mane. The Raider was pressing one

forehoof, clad in heavy, rusty metal barding, onto Softmane's chest, crushing the filly down into the mud. Softmane tried moving her hindlegs, but found they were wrapped up in some kind of thick wire, two iron balls at either end binding her legs together.

"Hehhey! Ya got the little cunt!" said another Raider who trotted up, a purple mare with a half shaven head, her remaining white mane little more than wispy strands, "Makes the tenth foal we've got! Gonna be a helluva haul."

The orange Raider licked her lips, her breath in Softmane's face smelling of blood and sour things. "Gotta love slavers. Pay so much to get them young.

Softmane turned her head away as the orange Raider ran one hoof over the filly's face, almost delicately, as the other hoof pressed even harder on her chest, making it hard to breath. She wanted to try and look tough, like she knew her mother and father would want her to be. She tried to raise a hoof to push the Raider's crushing hoof off her, or punch at that leering face, but all she got for her trouble was a sharp jab to her belly that left her coughing.

"Ha! Little bit of fight in that one!" said the purple Raider, "Maybe we oughta keep her for ourselves?"

Orange grinned at that, hauling Softmane to her hooves, only to smash the filly's face with a quick punch that left Softmane dazed on the ground, blood welling from a split lip, "Might be we could squeeze a Raider out of this one, but nah, ain't in the mood to break one in- aaaah! Little bitch!"

Softmane had used the Raider's distraction to sink her teeth into an unarmored portion of the Raider's leg, using the images of dead Mrs. Patio and the burned Peach Creme as fuel for a burst of anger in her tiny heart. She could still hear gunshots. She knew the ponies of Threestone were still fighting, including her mother! She'd fight too! She'd-

An explosion of pain in her back loosened her grip on the Raider's leg, and the dirty orange mare, glaring, raised her hoof again and smashed it into the filly's stomach. The purple Raider was laughing, rolling on the ground as she hooted and hollered, the orange Raider repeatedly bringing her hoof down onto the cringing Softmane. She tried to protect her head as best she could from the rain of blows, wondering if the Raider was just going to keep going until she was turned to bloody mush.

An intense fear gripped the filly then, her anger washing away with the realization that she was going to die. In that moment of absolute terror, Softmane did the only thing she could think of.

She prayed.

Softmane didn't hear the lightning so much as felt it as a pressure wave of sound that flowed over her. It took several long moments for her ears to stop ringing, and when she opened her eyes, she

saw little more than a blackened pile of roughly pony shaped char next to her where the orange Raider had been. The other Raider was being held up in the air by a veil of sparkling blue magic, and Softmane grimaced as the purple mare's head was twisted around until a loud crack of breaking bone filled the air. The limp body was tossed aside by the magic like it was so much trash.

“We command you stand, tiny unicorn!” said a voice of grand feminine power from behind Softmane, “Stand and behold your salvation!”

Softmane stood on shaking legs and looked with small brown eyes turning wide at the sight of the pony before her. Taller than any adult she'd ever laid eyes on, the mare was an elegantly carved monolith of beauty. A coat of pristine blue and a long smooth silver mane framed a face of regal features, and two imperious purple eyes. Most notable were the massive, arched wings and the long pointed horn the pony bore. Softmane felt her lungs taking in short breaths.

“You... you...” the little filly kept trying to talk.

The alicorn looked at her, a smugly pleased smile on her features as she struck a pose, “Yes? Go on! We are prepared to accept your words of worship and gratitude!”

Softmane fainted. The alicorn paused, lowered her head with a sigh.

“Or faint. That works too.”

She didn't have a name in any normal sense. She was a component of a whole. She could of course differentiate her body from those of her sisters, even understood on a basic level that she was still, in some ways, an individual. Yet that mattered little. The Goddess, the Unity, the chorus of all voices and thoughts and emotions intertwined into a constant vibrating song, this was a constant. The closest she could come to compare it to was like being stuck in a crowded house with no real privacy. You might have your own room, but anypony could come into your room and use your things, and the landlady most of all was always watching.

So she was in her own body, or what her body had become when it had been transformed to join Unity, and she was still, in a sense, herself. However, she shared her body with hundreds, even thousands of others, especially Her. The Goddess. Mother.

Right now the Goddess was paying a miniscule amount of attention to her and her two sisters that had been sent alongside her on this little expedition; a feeling of power tinging her mind but not exerting any force. At any time the Goddess could occupy her, exert overriding will through her body and use it like one might move one's tail. For the moment, though, she and her two sisters had a certain autonomy.

Her two sisters were of the green variety; two identical alicorns of dark green coats and vibrant darker green manes. Without the Goddess exerting direct control the two greens were...a little impetuous and impulsive. So far to the north, the wave of voices, memory, and emotion from Unity was slightly subdued, and it was an odd feeling of consciousness that she hadn't felt in a long time. It was a novel feeling, but also disquieting, and allowed her to feel irritated at her sisters' behavior..

“Must we waste time indulging you're... inquisitiveness!?” she shouted at her two sisters, the pair of greens rummaging around inside a blasted out roadside convenience store. She could hear the pair giggling at each other in there like little fillies. The blue alicorn shivered, disliking the cold of this northern climate. Little wafts of snowflakes touched the dead ground of the mountain road.

“We have found most delightful frozen food items within!” called one of the greens, poking her head up from the broken window of the storefront with a patty of frozen hay in her mouth.

She ground her teeth in annoyance, feeling the Goddess' own spike of impatience. The greens felt it as well and she heard the two whimper. The Goddess wanted them to return home quickly. She knew the Goddess considered the expedition a failure. All they had found was one settlement, mostly burned by filthy Raiders. After exterminating the filth all they had found of value was one candidate for Unity. The small filly in question was huddling behind her as she watched her two sisters walk guiltily from the convenience store, a few boxes of ancient frozen food hovering between them.

She gave the filly a glance. The small brown foal had been quiet since being rescued. There had been other survivors of the settlement, mostly foals the Raiders had captured, but only this filly had been a unicorn, and hence capable of joining Unity. She and her sisters had taken the filly and left the others, as they had been of no importance. Perhaps the filly was having difficulty adjusting to events? No matter. Soon all the filly's problems would be over and she'd have a new family with the Goddess and the many souls of Unity.

“We are sorry, but these taste very good for their age!” said the green on the right, while the one on the left snuck out an old frozen bag of something beige with little brown chips in it.

“Look! We suspect this is cookie dough!”

The blue alicorn felt an eyebrow quirk as she looked at the pair, “Two hundred year old cookie dough?”

“Frozen,” said one of the greens defensively, a chorus of agreeing voices through Unity stating that the treat should've kept over the centuries, magical preservatives from before the war being of remarkable quality, “The freezer was entirely intact and functioning! Everything is fine! We know it to be so!”

The blue sighed, but more voices in Unity agreed than disagreed and the Goddess didn't care as long as they hurried up and returned home. The two greens would have their frozen cookie dough and hay patties.

“Very well, We must go, then, now. Tiny pony!” the filly jumped at the commanding tone, “Prepare yourself for travel!”

“U...um...” the filly started to say, looking up at her with wide eyes.

She looked down at the filly, frowning, “What is it? We command you climb upon us and hold tightly as we fly! There can be no delays!”

“...Hungry.”

“Speak louder, tiny pony! We can barely hear you!”

“I'm hungry... c-could I have something, please?” the filly punctuated this question with a particular look; puffed up lips and wide eyes that made the blue alicorn feel quite uncomfortable. She nodded to the two greens.

“Very well, bring forth the cookie dough!” she commanded, lifting the filly with her magic and setting the pony upon her back, “You shall eat as we fly. Do not fall off. We would be very cross with you if we must catch you!”

The filly gave her a weak nod and wrapped her small hooves around her neck.

One of the greens puffed up her cheeks in a look of displeasure, “We do not see why we should give up delicious cookie dough to the tiny one. There are other food items within that could feed her just as easily without sacrificing the deliciousness!”

The blue gave her sister a sharp, imperious look, snatching the frozen bag of cookie dough from the green's telekinetic grip, “We shall waste no time with further scrounging in the muck! Daylight fades, we fly until nightfall! This is the will of the Goddess!”

There was some further grumbling from the two greens, but little else as the three alicorns alighted into the darkening evening sky, steering a southern course through the mountain valley. Even in this region, less settled even before the war, balefire radiation had done its wicked work. The mountains were dull, brown, lifeless peaks, dotted with thick, deformed forests of twisted trees bearing blackened or browned leaves. As the three alicorns steered through a growing haze of snow from the thick clouds above the blue one used magic to warm the cookie dough and float out a few chunks for the filly to munch upon.

The filly ate eagerly, but the blue alicorn soon felt the small unicorn shaking. The blue frowned, needing a minute to realize the cold was the issue. She quickly redirected her heating spell to the filly herself, and soon she felt the filly relax, letting out a small sigh. The blue nodded in satisfaction that all matters were attended to, but a few minutes later the filly was shaking again. With a snort of annoyance the blue turned her head to recast her heating spell, only to notice the filly wasn't shivering, but was instead shaking from sobs, small glittering streams of tears pooling from where she'd buried her face into the blue's neck.

"We... what is wrong with you, tiny pony? We have fed you, you are warm, there should be no further issues!" the blue's eyes widened, "You do not need to stop to use the tiny filly's room do you!?"

The filly shook her head, saying nothing. The blue glanced at her sisters, but the two greens looked equally baffled, one of them giving the blue a helpless shrug. The Goddess was no help, barley paying the wing of alicorns any mind, and the blue got the impression the Goddess didn't care much for crying little fillies anyway. The blue pressed her lips together in a thin line. Evening was soon turning to night, and even alicorns required physical rest and nourishment themselves. Those hay patties her sisters had found did look enticing.

"We have decided!" she declared, "That we shall land and make camp for the night. Sisters, find us a suitable place!"

The two greens exchanged a look, "Why must we do all the hard work?"

"We carry the filly! That is hard work. We are making use of your excessive curiosity to proper advantage. Seek a place of shelter so that we may pass the night in comfort!"

"Bossy blue," one of the greens muttered as the pair banked down towards the winding mountain road they'd been following south. The blue held a circling pattern, awaiting the two greens to finish scouting a decent place to rest, still not sure why the filly on her back was shedding tears. More bothersome was the thought that she ought to understand the filly's tears. The normally comforting, if still faint buzz of Unity's voices held no answer, and there was a sense of displeasure from the Goddess.

The blue alicorn alleviated her anxiousness by focusing on her two sisters. As part of Unity they were linked, and it took only a moment of concentration to sense through their eyes and ears. Sharper than mere impression, it was more akin to having simultaneous images and sounds interposed over her own. To normal ponies it would be disorienting, but for her it was as easy as breathing.

The two greens had found an old log cabin along a dirt road that split off from the main road. The cabin was squat and its windows dark. Piles of metal work and junk dotted the surrounding yard, which was filled with tall yellowed grass. A old wagon, rusted through from the elements, was parked out front. The greens circled the cabin once, one of them noting an outhouse in the yard behind the

cabin.

This will have to do, sisters, the alicorn communed to the pair as she tilted downward from her holding pattern and circled down above the forest until she reached the small clearing with the cabin. The two greens met her out front, both them unusually tense in their posture and giving the surrounding forest sidelong glances. The blue sensed their fear, and even the distant chorus of Unity didn't seem to calm them. She couldn't deny a strange sense of unease herself.

"We shall use this place to shelter for the night," she declared to her sisters, then looked at the filly on her back, "You can let us go now. We are no longer flying."

The filly gingerly slipped off her back, looking at the cabin nervously. The blue alicorn strode towards the porch confidently. If there was anything dangerous within it would discover the potency of three of the Goddess' children. Inside the blue alicorn discovered that the cabin was cramped and cold. Only a simple cluttered living area with a fireplace and adjoining kitchen was to be seen from the front door, and less than a minute of poking around showed that only a small bedroom and closet were the only other areas within the cabin. The blue sniffed, sneezing a bit at the dust stirred into the air by her movements. It was clear nopony had been here in some time.

Soon all three alicorns and one young unicorn filly were sitting together in the cabin. The two greens had quickly gotten bored and one of them went to rummage through the kitchen, while the other started playing around with a large spherical object she'd dug out of one of the trash piles behind the living room's single moth eaten couch. A few of the voices through Unity identified the object as a 'bowling ball'. The blue alicorn absorbed a little knowledge of the sport from Unity and decided it was ridiculous.

"Be careful with that," the blue said sternly, to which the green gave her a look and started levitating the bowling ball around in complex patterns around her head, the blue sighed, "Fine, but don't expect us to clean up the mess when you break something."

The filly was sitting in a corner near the fireplace, shivering, and was looking at the fireplace with a forlorn expression. The blue gave the filly a frowning look, and lifted a wing, "If you require warmth, we shall allow you to sit next to us. It will be easy to maintain a warming spell if you remain close, tiny one."

"M...my name is Softmane..." the filly said, scooting closer to the blue and hesitantly cuddling up under the alicorn's wing, sighing as the blue cast her warming charm and bathed the air around the filly with heat. Softmane gave the alicorns in the cabin curious looks, now that she was comfortable.

"Don't any of you get cold?"

The green playing with the bowling ball, spinning the object around lazily, laughed, "We aren't

bothered by a little cold weather! Our bodies are way better than yours, at least until you join us. Then the cold won't be a problem at all."

The green's stomach rumbled, "Hunger, though, still a problem."

The other green raised her head from behind the small stove she'd been poking at. "We have found cans of mystery food," she declared, raising several small metal cans whose labels had long since become so jaded as to be unreadable, "Shall we prepare them?"

The other alicorns gave silent nods, and soon the cabin was filled with the clang of pots and pans as one the green fumbled about cooking the mysterious contents of the cans. None of the alicorns were concerned with trace radiation in the food, as the residual magic byproduct would only bolster their bodies.

"So...um..." Softmane spoke up, cautiously looking up at the blue alicorn, "What are your names?"

"We have no use for names," the blue stated as if the question itself had been pointless, which to her it was.

"How do you tell each other apart?"

The green with the bowling ball snickered at the blue's clear consternation, the blue replying, "We are not apart. We are of the Unity. There is no need for--"

"What's Unity?"

"Augh... you will be learning what Unity is soon enough, tiny one--"

"Softmane. I'm Softmane. Mom said it was bad manners not to use a pony's name, if you know it," the filly said, seeming to be getting more energetic. A combination of warmth and cookie dough? The energy was dampened by a crestfallen look on Softmane's features, "Thank you for saving me, but can I go home now?"

The blue alicorn's expression went stony, "We are taking you home. A new, better home, with a large family. You will join Unity. Rejoice, it will be a glorious new life!"

"But my mom might be looking for me! I have to go back home, because she'll be worried..." the filly huddled in on herself, starting to cry. The blue hesitantly pulled her wing tighter around the filly.

"It is unlikely they still live. We saw survivors, but not many. Mostly young. None that looked

old enough to be parents,” the blue alicorn said with uncertainty. There was nothing in the many voices of Unity that told her how to speak to a pained, grieving filly. Most emotions and memories dealing with that kind of thing were expunged from Unity as needless. The blue felt particularly out of sorts as Softmane’s crying continued.

“The awkwardness has been doubled,” muttered the green who curled up around her bowling ball. The blue sensed the green fully intended to take the object with her and keep it as a souvenir of the trip.

Soon the cans of mystery food were ready, turning out to be some manner of corn. Not all that appetizing, but it filled the basic need to have a full belly, and the hay patties taken from the convenience store were much better. By the time they were done eating Softmane had ceased crying, instead staring blankly at nothing. The blue, not sure if this was a better state of affairs or not, just kept the filly held close to her until eventually Softmane fell asleep.

There was quiet amongst the alicorns until one of the greens spoke aloud, “She won’t feel bad once she is with us. Unity has no sadness.”

The blue stirred, looking down at the sleeping filly, Softmane’s face still tear stained even in slumber. The blue wasn’t sad, it was true. There was no room for emotions like that among the churning voices of Unity. Even if one of her sister’s were killed, whatever she might feel at that ‘death’ would be expunged quickly, and tempered by the knowledge that the soul was part of Unity, and never gone. She too needn’t fear the death of her body. It was just a body, after all, and she was part of the Unity. The Goddess, as always, looked after her children. She would look after this filly, Softmane, as well.

Only she wouldn’t be Softmane. That name would cease to be.

She’d not feel sad for dead parents, because she would not remember them.

That was the beauty of Unity. One of its many strengths.

The blue frowned, an uncertainty flitting across her thoughts like an unwelcome fly buzzing in the room. She was *mostly* certain none of the adults that had survived the Raider’s attack could be the filly’s parents. And even if one or both of Softmane’s parents lived, what kind of life could they offer their filly that matched the unrivaled glory of Unity and serving the will of the Goddess?

The blue repeated that thought, wishing she were closer to Maripony, so that the strength of Unity was such that her doubts would be drowned out utterly by the unifying choir of souls that had given her such comfort before. She didn’t even notice how closely she was holding the filly by her side, or that the filly was holding her back.

The blue alicorn was stirred awakened by the sound of somepony approaching the cabin. The two greens, equally light sleepers, had also awoken, raising their heads at the sound of soft hoofsteps crunching down snow. No words needed to be exchanged between the alicorns, thoughts co-mingling into a plan of action instantly.

The blue cast a spell of invisibility, covering herself and the still sleeping Softmane. The greens stood and moved to either side of the room, horns glowing to erect iridescent shields around themselves.

A moment passed in silence, then the door burst open. An object rolled in, small and gray. The blue recognized a flash grenade from the pool of Unity's knowledge and closed her eyes and put a protective wing around Softmane just as the grenade went off in a brilliant burst of light. Gunfire followed, as a pony levitated a rifle around the corner of the door and fired into one of the green alicorn's shields. The magical barrier easily absorbed the shots.

The blue felt Softmane stir awake at the noise, and held the filly even closer to her invisible form as she narrowed her eyes. Dropping her invisibility she cut loose with a blast of lightning from her horn, which shattered the floating rifle. She heard the pony let out a curse and saw the shadowy shape of the pony duck around the cabin.

There is only one, said one of the greens, A unicorn mare. She is running.

She will not get far, said the other green who dropped her shield and trotted to the door.

Wait, it may be a trick, said the blue, but too late. Another gunshot rang clear through the air and the unshielded green's head jerked to the side with a gaping hole, blood and brain alike spraying the wall as she stumbled to the ground.

The blue felt anger flare, both through her own thoughts and through the quaking voices of Unity. The Goddess might be able to make more of her children, and did not let them fear death, but the harming of one of their own still caused outrage. The blue surged to her hooves, ignoring the confused questions of Softmane.

Renewing her invisibility she strode out the front door, stepping over her fallen sister, and scanning around for the pony that would dare harm the children of the Goddess. She spotted the unicorn mare darting around the corner of the cabin, now with a large revolver floating in her magical grip. The blue alicorn became visible once more and fired another blast of lightning, blasting out part of the cabin in a shower of wood. She heard the unicorn mare yelp in pain and the alicorn grinned, turning invisible again before cautiously moving forward.

She spotted the unicorn mare picking herself up from the fresh fallen layer of snow, hide bloody from wood splinters the size of knives having stabbed her. The alicorn became visible again and blasted the mare's revolver out of the air, even as the weapon got off a shot that grazed her cheek. The alicorn snorted.

"That will be enough of that!" she grabbed the unicorn mare in her own magic and lifted the mare up, holding her suspended in the air as she charged up another lightning bolt, "The Goddess will bring down judgement upon those who harm her children!"

"Wait!" a tiny voice shouted before the blue could unleash her lightning.

Softmane had appeared around the corner, her small form trembling, "Don't hurt her!"

The blue frowned, "This one has brought harm to Unity! The Goddess demands judgement to be swift and-"

"That's my mom!!"

The blue blinked, and looked at the unicorn mare in her grasp. She noted the brown coat and gray mane, identical to Softmane's. She looked back at Softmane, then back at the unicorn she held suspended in the air, lightning still crackling around her horn like an eager, living thing.

"We find this circumstance to be extremely off putting," the blue alicorn declared to no pony in particular.

"S-Softmane, honey, run!" the unicorn said, struggling uselessly in the grip of the alicorn's magic.

Softmane shook her head and rushed up, "No! I thought you were dead, mom! I'm not going to run away! Please, let her go."

Softmane was shaking the blue alicorn's leg. The surviving green alicorn had come outside to see what was happening and was frowning at the scene, hovering her bowling ball nearby as if she intended to use it as a bludgeon on Softmane's mother. The blue alicorn could feel the green's thoughts and knew that's exactly what the green was considering. The blue sent a small mental message for the green to hold off, then fixed Softmane's mother with a narrow eyed look.

"We are confused as to why you are alive. You were not among the survivors we saw from the settlement! Explain!" she shook the unicorn mare about a bit, partly to emphasis that a quick response would be preferable, and partly because it made her feel slightly better..

"During the fight I had to take cover in one of the houses. Big red Raider mare with a rocket

launcher popped a shot right through the door. I managed to dive down the basement stairs just in time, but the whole damn house came down. Pure luck I didn't get crushed. By the time I dug myself out, the fight was over, the Raiders dead or run away, and my daughter taken by you... whatever in Tartarus you are!"

"We are the children of the Goddess," the blue said, holding her head high, then quirked an eyebrow, "You followed us all this distance? So quickly?"

The unicorn mare's brown eyes flashed with intensity, "You had my daughter. I'd have tracked you across all of Equestria, without rest, without fail, to get her back! Besides, three brightly colored ponies stand out against a gray sky. You weren't hard to follow."

The Goddess had been paying some minor attention to events, incensed by the death of one of her children, but ever thinking forward, ever practical, the Goddess had a new thought besides punishment. While the Goddess sought magical knowledge to add to the pool of Unity above all else, other traits were of value as well; including determination and willpower. Unity's voices spoke in a ocean current of whispers, all gradually coming to agreement with their Goddess.

"We see," said the blue alicorn, receiving her new orders from the Goddess, "Then rejoice. You're tenacity impresses the Goddess! You shall join Unity alongside your daughter!"

The mare's eyes went wide, and her features turned into a snarl, "What are you talking about!? I just want my daughter back, you blasted monsters!"

Softmane gulped, looking between the two, "Y-you couldn't just let us go!? You don't really need us in this Unity, do you? You could just forget you saw us."

The blue alicorn, for a moment, considered the option. Not for long, however. The Goddess asserted her will, making any further thought on the matter moot. The blue felt a pang of disquiet, saying, "There is no need for fear. The two of you shall be together in Unity, forever. It shall be a better life than what you would find otherwise. We give you our word."

Softmane's mother was less than enthused with that response, and struggled greatly. The blue alicorn had to use the rather inelegant method of blunt force trauma to knock the mare unconscious, then bind her thoroughly with strips of cloth taken from the cabin's window curtains. Softmane was easier to console, seeming so relieved that her mother was alive that she wasn't particularly argumentative.

"W...will we really be together, me and mom? We'll be okay, in, uh, Unity, or whatever it is?" the filly asked anxiously.

"Of course, the Goddess does not lie," said the blue alicorn said confidently..

Softmane chewed her lower lip,, looking at the body of the green her mother had killed, “Um... sorry, about your friend.”

“We do not mourn death, for death does not trouble the children of the Goddess. Our sister lives eternally in Unity, as shall you and your mother.”

Silence stretched out between them as the sky lightened with the gray wash of pre-dawn. The air was frigid, but the blue kept the area warm with a heating spell as she helped her remaining sister secure Softmane’s mother to her back with more strips of cloth. If they flew all day they’d be close to home. The blue couldn’t wait to be back in the safe embrace of Unity’s full presence; mostly so it’d silence the uneasiness in her at the events of this trip. It’d made her think far too much.

As she helped Softmane onto her back, the filly wrapping her hooves around the blue’s neck one more time, she spoke up, “Does it hurt?”

“Does what hurt?”

“Joining Unity?”

The blue looked up, thinking. She couldn’t honestly remember what joining Unity was like. Amid the wash of countless memories from hundreds upon hundreds of ponies that had gone through the process, the actual memory of the event itself was elusive. She was about to say she didn’t know, when the Goddess exerted her control once more, the overbearing presence flowing through the blue alicorn’s consciousnesses like a heavy, wet blanket.

“Of course it doesn’t. You will be fine, little pony, trust us.”

The Goddess withdrew and the blue alicorn hid a small frown from Softmane. She had the faintest impression, despite not really remembering the event, that the Goddess wasn’t being entirely truthful about the painlessness of joining Unity. However, ultimately, it didn’t matter. Painful or not, neither Softmane nor her mother would recall the process, and if they did, they would not care. Unity was all that mattered.

They took the sky, the two remaining alicorns now bringing two more candidates to add to the ranks of Unity. As they broke through the tree line and sailed past low hanging clouds, Softmane wrapped herself up in the blue alicorn’s mane. Before long she felt the filly shaking again, and the alicorn sighed.

“Are you crying again?”

Looking back, she saw that Softmane was indeed crying, but for some reason the filly was also

smiling. The blue cocked her head, confused.

“Huh? Uh, yeah, heheh,” Softmane laughed, wiping her face with the blue’s mane, which caused the alicorn to give the filly a cross look. Softmane responded with a sheepish grin, and shrug, “I don’t know why. My home’s gone, but my mom’s okay, so I don’t know what to feel. I’m happy, but I’m crying.”

The blue shook her head, “Strange. There will be no such confusion for you soon.”

Softmane’s hooves clenched tighter around the alicorn’s mane, “What’s Unity like? Is it a town, or what?”

“Ha, it is not a place, but a state of being. You shall be like us! Strong, eternal, and safe under the protective watch of the Goddess.”

“Like you, so me and mom will be all big and horny?”

The alicorn stumbled in mid-air, dropping several dozen feet before regaining her balance and steadying her flight, “Y-yes... in a manner of speaking. We would prefer you do not use such phrases in the future. Or ever.”

Softmane giggled, “Aww, that’s so cute, you get embarrassed! I’m a big filly, I know all about that kind of stuff. What, does the Goddess not let you have coltfriends,” the filly grinned evilly and whispered in the alicorn’s ear, “Or *marefriends*”

There was now a red alicorn in the sky, instead of a blue one, “We demand you cease teasing us this instant! The Goddess’ wills that dirty minded filly’s behave themselves and act properly!”

“Ooooh, or what?”

“Or we spend an hour practicing our barrel rolls.”

After a frightful squeak and burying herself in the alicorn’s mane Softmane said, “I’ll be good!”

The blue alicorn nodded her approval at the pacified filly and settled into what would hopefully be a relaxing and uneventful flight home to the Goddess. She pointedly *ignored* the snickering from the green alicorn, nor the amused thoughts from some of the others in Unity. As if any of them wouldn’t have been put off by such comments!

“You know, though,” said Softmane, “I should give you two names, if we’re going to be family together in this Unity thing.”

The blue sighed, rolling her eyes, “We do not need names; we have explained this!”

“Even if you were to give us names, you would not remember them after joining Unity,” pointed out the green, who was back to playing with her bowling ball, floating it between her hooves as she paid half attention to flying.

“I don’t get why I’d forget,” said Softmane, “I have really good memory! Mom never has to tell me the same lesson twice. Well, maybe twice. Once three times, but *anypony* could mistake rabbit and bear tracks!”

“It is... ugh, nevermind, we are tired of arguing. Name away,” said the blue alicorn irritably, though some part of her was oddly pleased with the filly’s insistence. With no memory of what her name had been before joining Unity she couldn’t remember what having a name was like. Something about the notion sounded... pleasant.

Distracted by such thoughts, the blue didn’t notice the unusual black smoky contrail approaching from below until her fellow alicorn sent a mental warning to her. The blue banked hard, narrowly avoiding what looked like a rocket trailing between the two alicorns. Her sharp maneuver caused Softmane, however, to slip right off her back. The filly screamed as she went into freefall, little legs flailing wildly. Clear Tracks, having regained consciousness at her daughter’s scream, began to struggle on the green alicorn’s back.

“Softmane!”

The green grunted and held Clear Tracks down with magic, while the blue’s eyes narrowed in focus as she tucked her wings and went into a dive after the falling filly. The ground rapidly approached, the alicorn’s having not been flying that high to begin with, and the blue alicorn just barely managed to snap Softmane’s tail in a grip of magic just as they fell below the treeline.

“Cease screaming, we have you,” the blue alicorn said as she floated Softmane over to her and started to climb, however sharp retort of automatic gunfire echoed through the forest and the blue felt a bolt of intense, rending pain as bullets ripped through her right wing.

She pitched to the right, slamming into a tree, and spun to the ground, only an extreme effort of focus allowing her to keep Softmane safely in her magical grip as she hit the ground and skidded a good dozen yards.

She dropped Softmane to the ground and struggled to her hooves, despite pain lancing through her from what she imagined had to be multiple bone fractures. She felt the thoughts of the green alicorn as her sister descended towards where she’d fallen, sending warnings of seeing movement throughout the trees, approaching fast. The blue heard whoops and eager laughter drifting through the forest and saw numerous ponies in dirty animal hide barding surrounding where she and Softmane had landed. All

of them bore weapons in varying states of rust and repair. One of them clearly had a smoking rocket launcher strapped to her flanks via a makeshift battle saddle.

Raiders. Quite possibly from the same tribe that had launched the attack on Softmane's settlement.

Softmane, terrified, was backing up towards the blue alicorn. The alicorn checked her right wing, wincing at the mangled limb, torn through with massive holes from a high caliber machine gun. She wouldn't be flying again any time soon. The green descended and landed next to her, Clear Tracks rolling off the other alicorn's back to land in the snow. Her daughter ran up to Clear Tracks, quickly biting at her mother's cloth bindings while the green alicorn erected a green shield around the whole group. The Goddess was observing things intently, and with great irritation. Through the voices of Unity the blue alicorn could sense the debate of what to do, whether to leave the wounded blue that couldn't fly behind and take the two candidates for Unity away to safety, or to try fighting the dozens of Raiders now surrounding them.

Silence! The Goddess' overriding voice thundered through Unity, ***We do not abandon our children! Fight, and slay these filthy creatures in pony skins! Assistance is coming!***

The blue and green alicorn could feel the Goddess' plan to send a wing of their purple sisters towards their location via teleportation, though the long distance still meant it'd take some time for them to arrive, but the Goddess was infuriated and dedicated to her children's survival.

The Raiders looked at the alicorn's with brief hesitance, but seeing their vastly superior numbers, the dozens of dirty, weapon laden ponies grinned at each with snickers of confidence. The one with the rocket launcher, apparently the leader, strode forward with a swagger of her red flank and planted herself at the head of her pack.

"Fancy glowing shield, but bet it can't take all of us hitting it at once. Let fly boys and girls, them that die will be meat for months, and any that live, playtoys for us to have a good time with!"

With that the red Raider mare let fly with a rocket and the others opened fire with a deafening barrage of gunfire. The green alicorn grunted in concentration as her shield was put to the test against such a punishing assault. Clear Tracks, free now from her bonds, had drawn her revolver and put her daughter behind her protectively.

"How long can you hold this thing up?" the unicorn mare asked, and the green alicorn blue a huff.

"Not as long as we should like! If you had not killed our sister we could make it last *much* longer, foalish pony!"

Clear Tracks frowned but her eyes were belying their fear as she put a hoof around Softmane, “Then what do we do?”

The blue alicorn assessed the shield, realizing that it would only hold for half a minute under this kind of fire. There were about twenty five to thirty raiders spread in a wide semi-circle in front of them, leaving the area behind them relatively clear. To defeat these numbers... did not seem possible. But hope was not lost. Unity had benefits beyond the obvious. A vast pool of knowledge to draw from was quite useful in the right circumstances. The blue alicorn questioned the vast collective of souls in Unity, and the Goddess herself, on how explosive rockets were when introduced to high electric current.

The answer was a definitive sense of a wide, malicious grin from the Goddess. She liked fireworks.

“We have a plan,” the blue said, “Be prepared to fight, once we create a big boom.”

“Big boom, what does that-” Clear Tracks began to say, but the blue alicorn was already channeling her spell. Coordinating with her green sister via their thoughts, the green opened a small hole in her shield, which was already starting to collapse, and the blue cast her lightning spell.

As it happened the red Raider mare was firing her rocket launcher after having just finished reloading it, just as the alicorn’s flashing blue bolt of lightning struck the weapon. Fuses were tripped inside the warhead and the weapon, and Raider, went up in a blazing flash of fire and bloody chunks. Shrapnel caught half a dozen Raiders standing by their leader, and the shockwave knocked down others.

In that momentary gap of distraction the alicorns, plus one unicorn mare, launched their attack. The green alicorn manifested shards of magic, like eldritch knives, and sent them flying into the ranks of Raiders. The blue advanced, despite her wounds, casting more bolts of lightning, while at the same time cloaking herself with invisibility in between blasts to confuse her presence. Clear Tracks stayed near her daughter, using her body as a shield, while taking careful aim and firing off precise shots with her revolvers.

By the ten seconds or so it took the Raiders to recover from the explosion of their leader and her impressive weapon, a third of them had been taken down by the tenacious attacks of their intended victims. However the Raiders got their act together quickly, and viciously returned the favor.

Despite being able to erect her shield once more, the green alicorn found her magic drained quickly under repeated gunfire, especially from a large bay stallion with a belt fed machine gun that gradually wore down the magical barrier. Despite ripping another few Raiders to shreds with eldritch knives, the green alicorn’s shield dropped and she was jerked back by the machine gun fire that peppered her hide. Still refusing to drop, perhaps incensed still by the loss of her sister earlier, the green

growled and levitated her bowling ball from where she'd kept it safely tucked up against her side, and sent the thing spinning into the ranks of Raiders, smashing heads and limbs alike.

The blue fared a little better, flickering in and out of invisibility as she lashed out with lightning, but a Raider wielding a large tree trunk with wood spikes wrapped around it got the drop on her and smashed into her side painfully. The blue cried out as the Raider smashed her side again, snapping the bones in a foreleg and bending the limb at an awkward angle. The black Raider mare raised her club to smash the blue alicorn's head, but instead had her own head blasted apart by Clear Track's last bullet before the unicorn had to slowly start to reload her revolver.

The green alicorn, fallen to her knees from dozens of bullet holes in her, managed to break the back of the machine gun equipped Raider with one last throw of her bowling ball, before slumping to the snow. The white of the snow was stained red with alicorn blood as the green sighed once, and then went still.

The blue, unable to stand either, still managed to raise herself enough to track the last few Raiders, only four left. A blast of lightning reduced that number to three, but then one of the Raiders lowered a bloody semi-automatic pistol and unloaded the clip at the blue. Most of the shots went wide due to the Raider's poor aim, but three or four smacked into the alicorn's hide and she felt a lung puncture clean through. Blood filled her throat and her horn fizzled, unable to conjure any more magic.

By now Clear Tracks had reloaded, and with her remarkable aim put a bullet through the neck of the Raider that'd shot the blue alicorn. The last remaining Raiders were both armed with melee weapons, a spear and a knife, and both were felled by Clear Tracks as they tried to rush her.

The battle had taken less than two minutes, but had left the snowy forest clearing covered in a field of dead bodies.

"Pleasebeokay!" said a fast, frightened voice and the blue alicorn, blood covering her once pristine blue coat, tilted her head to see Softmane rushing up to her. The filly looked over the fallen alicorn with tears in her eyes.

"M-mom! Mom she's hurt!"

Clear Tracks, miraculously unwounded during the fight, approached, reloading her revolver and looking around. She noted the green, unmoving and unbreathing, then sighed and looked over the blue as Softmane put her hooves over the alicorn's wounds, trying to stop the blood flow.

"I'm sorry honey, I don't think there's anything I can do," Clear Tracks said, and while there was sympathy in it for her daughter, the blue alicorn noted the undercurrent of relief in the mare's voice as well. There would be no taking these two to Unity now. The flight of purple alicorns were still some distance away, despite constant teleporting.

“No! No, no ,no, you have to do something!” Softmane pleaded, “Please, mom, she was... she was really nice to me, and saved me from the Raiders before!”

Clear Tracks shook her head, and Softmane’s eyes welled up, the filly trembling even as she kept trying to push her hooves over the bleeding bullet holes. The blue alicorn chuckled, then regretted it as pain filled her chest. She raised a hoof and gently stroked Softmane’s face.

“Dumb... filly. Haven’t listened to a word we have told you?” the blue alicorn said, even as she felt her body going cold and numb, which wasn’t so bad as that meant the pain was fading too, “This body means nothing... the Goddess keeps us, forever, in... Unity...”

The blue alicorn shuddered, closing her eyes, her breathing slowing. Softmane let out a choking sob, wrapping her hooves around the alicorn’s neck and burying her face in the alicorn’s mane.

“Warmth!” she said in a whisper, “That’s... what I wanted to name you. Warmth. Because you mane is really warm.”

“Warmth...” the alicorn’s eyes fluttered open, and her blood stained lips smiled, “We... thinks that’s a nice name...”

The blue alicorn, Warmth, took one last shallow breath. Then she became still, eyes staring blankly.

Clear Tracks allowed her daughter to cry for a minute longer, but suspected they didn’t have long before more alicorns showed up. Thankful as she was that these two alicorns had died protecting her and her daughter, Clear Tracks had no intention of letting more such creatures take them captive again. Soon, she pulled Softmane away with a gentle, but firm hoof.

“Come on, honey, we have to go,” Clear Tracks said with a comforting softness.

Softmane let her mother lead her from the clearing, though she looked back once last time at the form of the fallen alicorns. Her small brown eyes stared at the scene, as if trying to stamp it upon her memory.

Her mother’s hooves pulled her close into a hug as Softmane hung her head, and soon the filly was lifted onto Clear Tracks’ back as the mother and daughter left the clearing behind.

By the time the Goddess’ flight of purple alicorn’s arrived on the scene there was no sign of tracks from the captives the Goddess had intended to join Unity. Clear Tracks had covered her trail well and none of the alicorn’s knew how to begin a search. The Goddess considered sending the flight to Softmane’s and Clear Tracks’ settlement, but this expedition had been costly enough already. With a

wave of annoyance washing through Unity the Goddess ordered her alicorns to return home, resolving to focus her attentions on the more populated central regions of Equestria from now on and leave these isolated mountains alone. They just weren't worth it.

Amid the churning chorus of Unity's many souls, one soul floated in the aether, her consciousness losing almost all sense of individual identity amid the endless hum of her many sisters. But one word remained hanging, clear, despite the buzz of Unity's other souls. A word that for reasons she was already forgetting seemed very important, and she held onto the word, not letting it be swept away.

Warmth.

Victory

By Adder1

“Victory and defeat are each of the same price.”

The citizens were all blissful.

Yes, blissful. He could see it in their faces, looking out the open window into the city beyond. Clouds everywhere- clouds for banks, clouds for supermarkets, clouds for plantations, clouds for transport, clouds for everything. There even had to be marked pathways through the clouds to give a sense of direction. Nothing but soft, puffy tufts and blankets of clouds. This was their world now as it had been for the last two-hundred years. The sun was shining, the air was warm...

The citizens were all blissful.

All the pegasi went about their daily lives, filing into the capitol building, into the courthouses, and into the many agencies meant to keep them all just that- blissful.

He sighed and smiled.

“High General, she’s here.”

He sighed and frowned. “Let her in.”

He pivoted on his hooves and strode back to his oval office with its cloud desk and its cloud stationery and cloud cabinets, seating himself in his cloud swivel chair. His bodyguards, dressed in sharp military gear, earblossoms, shades and all the stereotypical nonsense, opened the great cloud doors and in walked a pegasus mare. She was the textbook military type, same as he- properly dressed in uniform, neatly groomed, plenty of decorations, and an even, steady stride. As if rehearsed, he stood and returned the salute as soon as it was given.

“High General Harbinger,” she greeted.

“Brigadier General Storm Surge,” he greeted in turn, dropping the salute. “At ease.” He turned to the guards. “Leave us.”

The pair nodded stoutly and vacated the premises, shutting the great cloud doors behind them. He motioned to the cloud chair across from him, and they seated themselves.

She started, “High General, first I want to-”

A wave of the hoof, and she was silent. “None of that,” he said with a tired sigh. “Your inauguration is tomorrow, and after that, I’ll just be old Harbinger. Continue.”

“Then Harbinger, I wanted to say that it will be an honor to serve in your stead,” Storm Surge continued with an even expression and tone. “I also disavow any and all crude remarks some of my supporters have been lambasting you with.”

“Hm... yes, an honor,” he said with a grimace. “Storm- can I call you ‘Storm?’”

She looked genuinely surprised. “Why of course, s-”

“Storm, do you know why I wanted to meet with you today?” he inquired.

“No, sir,” she replied.

“At *ease*,” he repeated, leaning toward her. “While proper conduct in the presence of a superior officer is a necessity, I’ll have none of it right now. Now,” He leaned further until he rested his forelegs against the desk, hooves forming a steeple, “the reason why I wanted to meet with you was to have a discussion regarding your inauguration and eventual duties as High General of the High Council. Are you aware of the official duties?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Then it’s time to discuss-” he grunted as he leaned back in his seat, still maintaining the steeple of his hooves, “-the unofficial duties. How well do you remember your history, Storm?”

“I graduated at the top of my class at the Academy,” she answered. Hm, was that a hint of pride in that tone?

“Mm,” he huffed, his smile waning. “Then tell me- who won The Great War?”

Storm Surge blinked. “I beg your pardon, Harbinger?”

“It’s a simple question.” He made a brief, sideways gesture with his hoof. “Who. Won. The Great War?”

“I’m under the impression that nopony, nobody did,” Storm Surge replied. And where was that hint of pride now?

He drew in a deep sigh and idly swiveled back and forth in his cloud chair, reclining back to look up at the cloud ceiling. “Victory,” he said wistfully. “The greatest goal, for with it comes the greatest spoils-

power, property, prestige, and!” He held up a hoof, eyes back on the general. “And above all, posterity. After all, it’s like they say- ‘history is written by the victors.’ So, by your logic, nopony, nobody has any sort of history to tell.”

“Where are you going with this?” she inquired.

He drew in another deep sigh and sat up in his cloud chair. “Storm, with your rank and current stature, there’s no doubt you already know about the true nature of what lies beneath, unclouded- pun not intended- by superstition. So what lies beneath our cloud cover?”

She did her best to maintain a straight face, but there was that subtle crease of the brow- similar to that of a schoolfily caught in a pop quiz. She answered, “Near total anarchy. What little civilization remains is but a shadow of ours, and the rest of it is pure lawlessness.”

He pursed his lips briefly. “Interesting choice of metaphor. Yes, you’re absolutely right. Modern-day Equestria is reminiscent of the Age of Darkness before the rise of the three pony nations. Zebrica is almost entirely glass and ash. Aldorna? We won’t discuss those griffin vermin. So we can both agree that the surface is in ruin- habitable, perhaps, with some primitive societies here and there- but more or less but a shadow of ours. And what *of* ours, Storm?” He motioned to the scenery outside. All the pegasi went about their daily lives, filing into the capitol building, into the courthouses, into the many agencies.

“Just look.” He went on, and she did. “Reminiscent not of Equestria from the Age of Darkness but of Equestria from the Age of Industry right before The Great War. We have businesses, we have a unified military, we have law and order, and we are content. No slaves or raiders, no bloodthirsty mutants or radiation. And what do you see if you look close enough at the faces of our citizens? They’re all happy... and blissful.

“Storm, I asked how well you remembered your history.” He continued. “What does that imply?”

The mare looked back at him. “I don’t understand, sir.”

He fought the urge to grimace. Patience, patience. “History is written by the victors, Storm. And you were *taught* history.” He smiled. “Don’t you see, Storm? We won! *We* won The Great War! The Grand Pegasi Enclave, and the Grand Pegasi Enclave alone won the greatest conflict in equine history! We achieved that greatest goal and won its greatest spoils- power, property, prestige... and posterity! And do you know just why posterity is so important, Storm? That we alone claimed victory in wake of The Great War meant that we alone claimed our future and the ability to write it as we pleased. As it is written, the surface is completely inhospitable to life, and the Grand Pegasi Enclave should remain isolated above the clouds. As it is written, its citizens will be governed under a military state ruled by a military elite. *As it is written*, we shall never have to venture beneath save for necessary resources. *As it is written*... we finally have peace in our time. And so it shall remain.

“So now do you understand what your unofficial duties are, soon-to-be High General Storm Surge?” he asked. “We’ve come too far now to let our spoils spoil. We must continue as it is written, and we cannot allow it all to come undone by a slip of the quill. Or the *tongue*. The High Council doesn’t take these matters lightly. In fact, The High Council- myself included- is highly reluctant to accept replacements such as yourself. Do you understand? We’re all taking a great risk having you replace me.”

“Yes, High General Harbinger,” she replied. She was silent for a good few seconds as if taking it all in. Then, “Permission to speak freely?”

“We have been, haven’t we?” he huffed.

General Storm Surge said, “I find it highly... unusual that you’re speaking to me so casually for a stallion of your rank and stature. Was there any particular reason for such a lengthy disc-”

With a soft whizzing sound, a new hole opened up in General Storm Surge’s forehead, a thin line of red trickling down as she slumped back in her cloud chair.

As it so happened, cloud windows didn’t have panes.

“Because I wanted you to sit still,” he replied lowly. “Because taking such a great risk having you replace me was too great a risk to take. Because it all must continue as written.” He cleared his throat. “Guards.” The cloud double doors opened, and in came the nearly identical bodyguards. “Dispose of her. Raise the alarm. And remember- this was an assassination attempt on me. She was an unfortunate victim.”

“Yes, sir,” they complied, hauling the body out and away from the chair and shouting down the haul.

As the alarm was raised, he rose. Before additional bodyguards would come for him and escort him to a safer location, he looked back outside, now at the pegasi citizens briefly interrupted from their daily lives by the alarm and lockdown, interrupted from filing into the capitol building, into the courthouses, into the many agencies meant to keep them all just that- blissful.

No...

The citizens were still all blissful.

Blissfully unaware of their victory and the price that came with it.

“Victory and defeat are each of the same price.”

Wink

By Pallydan

“Read it and weep, fillies and colts,” I said with a smirk before flipping over my cards. I had pocket eights with two eights in the community cards. Three ponies went all in and I was the only one walking away from this table with caps, all of them to be precise. Rolling my shoulders and cracking my neck, I tipped my black cowpony hat to the pretty pink unicorn mare carrying a tray of drinks. “Round of Wild Pegasus, sweetheart.”

“Right away, honey,” she said with a wink before trotting back to the bartender behind the saloon counter. I watched her go for a brief moment, noticing the way she swished her blonde and pink striped tail under the skirt of her black and purple burlesque dress. I’m not usually the type of pony that goes after every mare that gives me a wink, especially with my luck at cards attracting every two cap whore in the Las Pegasus area to my bed, but something about this mare really caught my eye.

“What’s your deal, Knack?” one of my opponents, an earth pony mare named Lola asked. With her good eyes she looked down at her pet Nightstalker, Cabbage, before returning her gaze to me. “What’s with the drinks? Trying to rub it in?”

“Nope. Not at all, my cyclopean friend. I’m trying to bury the hatchet and show that it’s all just fun and games.”

“Fun for you maybe. We’re the ones who are out a thousand caps,” Whynot Burp, a rather gaseous former sheriff turned gambler, remarked before living up to his namesake with a thunderous roar of stomach gas.

“Oh come on, Burp. You know you were having fun when you dropped those two pair on me,” I said.

“Until you flipped over your higher pair,” he grumbled before pushing himself away from the card table. “Congratulations yet again, Knack. You really live up to your name. You’re the luckiest earth pony in the Las Pegasus Wastes. I hope you choke on your Wild Pegasus.” With that, the little gassy ray of sunshine stormed out through the swinging saloon door, sparing us any more assault to our already burdened olfactory sense.

“Isn’t he the grumpy gus,” the serving mare said with a smile as she returned to the table with four glasses of hard, pre-war whiskey, but only had three ponies to serve them to. Levitating three glasses to the dealer, Lola, and myself, she looked at the remaining serving of liquor. “What do I do with the fourth glass?” She then gave me a coy little cock of her eyebrow that told me all I needed to know about this little spitfire.

“Join us for a drink then. It’s his loss and your gain,” I said, patting the seat next to me with a hoof. She nodded her head cordially before taking the seat next to me. “There we go. Now wait, I didn’t catch your name.”

“That’s because I had a leave of my senses and didn’t toss it your way,” she said wryly before adding, “Sarsaparilla Smiles.”

“Knack,” I replied before raising my glass to the others. “Here’s to a great tournament.”

“Here, here,” Lola said before downing her drink in one quick gulp and letting out a pained, yet

satisfied breath. "Burns so good, just like losing."

"That's the spirit," I laughed, watching Sarsaparilla sip her drink while The Dealer silently gazed upon us like always, not even making a sound as he gulped down his whiskey.

The Dealer of the Lost Wages Saloon was one of the most mysterious and quiet ponies I had ever met. No pony knew his name. He was just 'The Dealer' and seemed to be satisfied with that. There was a legend that occasionally graced the lips of the ponies of the Neighvarro. They said The Dealer was an ancient buffalo spirit of chaos, much like the draconequus Discord. Ponies said he never aged and that he had haunted these wastes for centuries. Even before the fall of Equestria, The Dealer remained to deal the cards of fate to any ponies that crossed his path. He was a force of nature.

Or, as I found out after one of my lucky streaks, he was a unicorn who excelled at illusion magic and just made himself look like an earth pony to make others underestimate him. On that front, we were in agreement. Everyone knew to expect cheater magic from unicorns or slight of claw from griffins, but no one expected anything special from earth ponies. That's why ponies never really expected me to be able to cheat as well as my lucky streaks would dictate. Being an earth pony allowed me the ability to avoid the cursory suspicions of the pit bosses. No pony could catch me cheating so they resigned themselves to the fact that I just had a crazy good run of luck when it came to the cards.

"So how do you do it, Knack? I've been told this is your third tournament win this month and you're twelfth since moving to our little stretch of hell on Equestria," Sarsaparilla asked, placing a gentle hoof on my charcoal duster's sleeve.

"I see my reputation has preceded me, but I don't remember you ever being in this dive before," I said, Lola groaned.

"They say if you're unlucky at love, then you're lucky at cards or something like that. Maybe I should leave you to be so Knack here can lose some of that luck," she said, giving me a tired smile after pushing away from the table. "Good luck."

"Always have," I quipped back, getting more of a grin out of her and a hiss from her pet.

"Come on, Cabbage. We're going." Cabbage hissed happily and followed her out, the saloon doors swishing softly behind them as they left.

"And then there was one," Sarsaparilla Smiles said, smiling at me over the glass of whiskey as she levitated it in front of her face.

"Really?" I asked. I glanced at The Dealer before coughing as nonchalantly as a forced expulsion of air from my lungs could possibly be achieved. The Dealer seemed to understand, his gray eyes addressing me with a mirth that his face dare not betray, before taking his own glass in his mouth, tossing it with expert precision onto the crown of his head, and silently walking away from the table.

"Damn. He's really committed."

"Committed to what?"

"Nothing," I said, quickly trying to turn her attention away from my off the hoof comment and back on to me. "So what made you want to become a barmaid at this lovely establishment?"

"Sarcasm will get you everywhere," she replied with a copious amount of snark of her own.

"*I think I'm in love,*" I thought without a hint of the sarcasm to my inner monologue that usually tinted my normal speech. She then shook her head and sighed before downing the glass.

"If you must know," she said while pouring herself another glass. "A series of bad choices and a family that needed my help."

“Family’s important.”

“Yeah,” she said, trailing off and looking towards the door. I had to think fast. I was losing her. I gave a nod to Ivory, the black stallion behind the piano, and he started to play.

“How about we talk about something else. Oh, hey, wanna dance?” I asked, jumping to my hooves and pulling her to hers without even asking. She laughed.

“I don’t take it that ‘no’ is an acceptable answer?”

“Yes, it isn’t. We don’t say the ‘n-word’ around these parts,” I told her. She laughed again and twirled for me. I smiled. Not just because I got her back, but because it actually made me happy to see her happy. What was it about this mare that made me act like this?

We danced and drank and talked the night away. Well, to be fair, she drank and talked and danced, I just did the latter two, mostly. I had a few drinks, but I was always careful to stay mostly sober, keeping the drinking to a low buzz. It was always my rule of fetlock that the only time a pony should get wasted is if there’s no possible way somepony else could barge in and waste them. I called it the Wasteland Wasted Rule. A buzz is fine, but I never wanted to get a D. W. I. (That’s Dying While Intoxicated for you uninformed ponies out there.)

“Let’s get out of here,” she whispered in my ear.

“My room’s upstairs,” I said, glancing towards the stairs. She shook her head.

“No. Those mattresses are nasty. Let’s go back to my place. it’s just down the alley and a block away.” She stopped before adding. “I have clean sheets I brought back with me from New Pegasus.”

“I’m sold,” I laughed. Grabbing me by the collar of my duster with her telekinesis, Sarsaparilla Smiles dragged me out the swishing doors and down the alleyway between the saloon and the general store. We were only a few steps in to the poorly lit passage between buildings when I noticed the three ponies following us. I then noticed three more blocking our exit and my eyes darted to the side door.

“Locked the door, Knack,” a familiar voice belched. “You ain’t going anywhere. Your luck’s run out.”

“Burp? What are you doing here so late at night? If you wanted another game, I’d be more than happy to play you again in the morning,” I said, a hint of nervousness starting to creep into my voice as my eyes caught the silver and chrome of battle saddles and six shooters on their hips.

Two unicorns and four earth ponies. I could probably handle them with an apple grenade or two, but I might catch Sarsaparilla in the explosion. My eyes darted to and fro while my mind thought of some means of escape for the pretty mare and myself until I noticed her head was lowered and her eyes were closed. Burp laughed as he approached and Sarsaparilla started moving towards him, her hooves barely leaving the ground.

“Good work, sis. Now let me just kill this fucker and take my money back and we’ll be on our way home.”

“You said you just wanted to get your money back! Please don’t kill him,” she said, her voice weak and no longer the strong mare I had known in the saloon. However, the hoof that flew and struck her on the side of the face still sent my blood boiling and a small growl escaped my lips the moment she hit the ground.

“Shut up! Whores don’t get a say in my plans!” Burp spat literally, the yellowish glob hitting her wounded cheek for added insult. “You don’t want me telling mama how I found you in New Pegasus.”

“No,” she whispered, tears already starting to streak down her face only to be slowed by the phlegm.

“This is between the two of us, Burp. No pony else needs to be involved,” I said, trying to turn his attention away from Sarsaparilla and back onto me.

“Aren’t you a real knight in shining armor?” Burp said. Turning back to me, he sneered. “You actually like my sister, don’t you? You’ve fallen for a two bit whore.”

He and his posse broke out into deriding laughter before Burp lifted a hoof, silencing them after a few seconds of mirth.

“Enough of this. Give me my money, Knack.”

“No, ‘Or else?’” I asked wryly. One of Burp’s lackey chortled, but their leader was not amused.

“You cheated me, you fucker. I don’t know how, but no pony’s that lucky.” Reaching for his six shooter, I watched as the others followed suit. Like an army of cicadas, they pulled out their revolvers with blindingly slow speed for me. The world crawled as my mind prepared for the carnage about to befall me.

Memories of my old life flashed before my eyes. Joining the military with my brother. Going through boot camp. That fateful day when the brass sent our brigade to assault a dragon’s hoard. The horrifying sight of my big brother consumed by the green flames he had just barely pushed me out of the way of the oncoming inferno. How I fled for my life and didn’t stop until I realized I was in a cloudless desert as night was falling and the lights of New Pegasus were lighting up the horizon.

The world snapped back to reality as Burp’s gang started to turn back to me. Sarsaparilla closed her eyes tight, fighting tears and trying to avoid catching even a glimpse of my all but inevitable demise, while Burp and my eyes met. Leaping straight up, I shot my forehooves out as fast as I could, spinning the magnum revolves around on my fetlock mounted battle bracers. Gripping the wire triggers near my collar in my mouth, I fired two bullets aimed squarely between Burp’s eyes.

Luckily for him, he saw my counter attack coming and hit the dirt faster than I thought a pony of his bulk could move. Unlucky for the two ponies standing behind him, one’s head exploded into a spray of gore and bodily fluids while the other took a shot to the left shoulder that sent him spinning to the ground.

“Fire!” Burp screamed. Expecting my more than obvious descent, Burp’s flunkies unloaded at the air beneath my hooves.

But I did not fall. You may be asking, ‘Knack, now you’re lying. What comes up must come down,’ but I had another secret under my duster besides a pair of .44 magnums. Through the slits in the back of my coat, I unfurled my wings and took to the skies, leaving those below me looking up in stunned awe as I zoomed past them.

While most were incapacitated by the shock of revealing my true race, some even dropping their weapons, others fired into the air, but they fired wide as my dark gray duster was lost in the darkness above. I could have run, but there was a little pink mare that wouldn’t be safe with her odiferous and abusive brother. Damn my chivalrous nature.

Looping back around, I unloaded round after round into the ponies below, expertly avoiding Sarsaparilla while weaving between rounds that they fired back. Flying past Burp, I reached out with my forehooves and scooped Sarsaparilla up without missing a wingbeat. Then as we zoomed past the three ponies near the mouth of the alley I dropped an apple shaped grenade with my tail. Moments

later, an explosion ripped through the twilight before dawn before I gently set down the pretty little mare in the burlesque dress.

“You’re... you’re a pegasus?” she asked, her eyes wide and her body shaking.

“Guess my secret’s out,” I said, looking back at the carnage behind us as the smoke started to clear. “Unless I got them all.”

BANG!

A bullet ripped through my shoulder as Burp limped out of the smoke, bleeding from practically every inch of his body and his armor in tatters. Dropping his empty revolver from his mouth, Burp crossed the street laughing under his breath between pained coughs.

“You little bitch. You’re a pegasus? A fucking winged rat pony? You probably kept cards in your wings. That’s how you did it,” he said before pulling out a long hunting knife. “I’m going to have fun clipping your wings, Knack.”

“Smiley,” I moaned, smiling up at her with a pained grin. “I’m sorry about this.”

“It’s not your fault. I’m sorry,” she said, her voice hardly a whimper. “It’s my fault were here. I shouldn’t have listened to my brother, but I can’t let him tell our mom. I can’t let her know about Tar...” Her voice trailed off and she looked back at Burp. “Please Whynot. Don’t do this.”

“Get outta my way, whore,” he growled, a burp rumbling out of his mouth and around his knife.

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry about this.”

Whipping out the concealed sawed off shotgun in the holster on my left hind leg, Burp stopped as I leveled the twin barrels at his face and I watched as he dropped his knife. Pulling the trigger, I felt a tinge of regret and horror myself as his face collapsed in on itself and the force of the blast almost ripped his head off his shoulders.

And with a bloody, meaty flop, Whynot Burp belched his last burp.

Horrified, yet somehow also looking relieved, Sarsaparilla Smiles dropped down on to her haunches, crying. Hissing in pain as I stood up, I looked at her for a moment before my guilt made me look away.

“I’m sorry I had to do that,” I whispered before tucking my wings back under my duster. Just as I started limping away, a hoof came to rest on my still good shoulder.

“Knack,” she said weakly. “It’s okay.”

“But he was your brother.”

“He was a horrible pony and an even worse brother. I feel bad he’s dead and I’m going to have to tell our mom, but... but at least he can’t tell my mom about New Pegasus,” she said. Her voice bitter sweet with regret and relief, but it was obvious she was still hurting.

“We all have things we regret.”

“Is that why you hide your wings?”

“Yeah... I ditched the Enclave a few years back after they sent my unit into a dragon’s lair and I lost my brother. That damn purple lizard burned us alive and tore my commander to shreds.” I sighed.

“I’m lucky I got away and still have my cutie mark.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.” I looked down at Burp’s corpse before noticing that some ponies were already starting to emerge from their homes and shops after they were sure the fighting and gunshots had stopped. Looking over at Sarsaparilla, I gave her a sad smile. “We’re all running from something out

here in the Wasteland. That was one of the first things I learned down here beneath the clouds.”

“Hey, Knack?” I looked back at Sarsaparilla.

“Yeah?”

“I’m running from Las Pegasus, you’re running from the sky. Maybe... Maybe it won’t be so bad if we run together?”

“Maybe,” I said, my smile becoming more genuine and less sad. “That would be nice.” I hissed as I tried to walk. “Although you know what would be really nice? Another shot of Wild Pegasus.”

“Yeah, but this time it’s my treat. Wild Pegasus for my wild pegasus,” she giggled before pushing her head under my injured shoulder and helping me back towards the saloon.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” she laughed, happiness starting to creep back into her voice and she gave me a playful wink.

XENOPHOBIA

By Calbeck

My warriors kept their heads low, deep in the brush, watching me.

Pigments and hut-witch talismans kept them safe from the enemy. Kept me safe. Let us track one another, without being tracked in turn. The very sort of hedge-craft our noble Caesar so often turns his muzzle up against, preferring the polished magicks of his court-wizards and soothsayers.

Yet these make us safe enough to serve Caesar, this day. I found humor in that.

Our enemies had neither safety nor hope. In their faces were every color of the world, and many more beside, painting them for the entire jungle to account. They thought themselves clever and wise and brave, and were often boisterous in saying so to one another.

Nothing they did reflected this. They foolishly trampled the undergrowth, instead of slipping around it, creating a wake that marked their passage. They chopped at it to hasten their travel, expending much energy and sweat-water, which they would not have when their battle began. Fear roiled from them like clouds of poisonous vapor.

These unnatural creatures.

In another era I would, perhaps, pity their silliness. In this one, they have chosen to serve the Destroyer of All, the Mare of the Moon. We who serve beneath the manes of Roam can spare no pity for such evil hearts.

But today, my village's duties to Roam are done. Our eyes and ears have served well, our hunting spears and lack of armor are no asset to the coming fight. I place one hoof beneath my right eye, looking to Sky-Killer. He bobs his tall-cropped mane, just a little, and darts away silently. In minutes Caesar's Third Legion will know our enemy is here, in what numbers, and in which direction they travel.

I look forward to a night of full sleep and a belly full of warm meal. Perhaps my Umyeni has been foraging for the crisp, delicious rutabegas missing from market this last year. The war drags on and takes with it every pleasant thing... with these thoughts clouding my mind, I lead my other six *contubernales* back through the deeper layers of jungle in single file. We are going home...

* * * * *

Hours later, our hooves strike upon the loam of our village's small yet fertile fields. Away from the jungle's humidity, the cool evening air breathes away the moisture from our skin. It would be a blessing after these days of hunting, but for the shouts and screaming from our distant huts. There are no fires, but if the enemy has found our homes... we fan out, spears at the ready, moving as quickly as we can without breaking our stealth. Surprise will be our greatest weapon --- perhaps, depending on what Equestria has sent to plague us, our only weapon.

But these are Caesar's troops. They are pulling every male child from the huts, dragging them to the central fire-circle, where they are thrown into the dust with weapons trained upon them. Mothers, sisters, fathers and brothers express both sadness and anger in equal measure, but they are prevented

from retrieving their kin by unsheathed swords and loaded carbines.

Conscription. They are not taking those of age, or even those elderly still fit for battle. They are taking only the colts.

It is the Third Legion's Fourth Centuria. Their commander claims the unlikely battle-name of Hydra-Rider. I would not suggest askance, but that his manicured hooves and cultured voice speak of a pampered life in the regional capital. It is more likely he has never so much as seen the beast over which he asserts mastery.

I present myself to him, *Decanus* to *Centurion*, with deference according to his superior rank. But my blood seethes the whole time. While his soldiers batter and seize my people, I must prostrate and fawn even to be heard in his clotted ears. Finally he admits: his first orders are from Roam, to find young bodies for a new Legion. He knows nothing more than his quota, and cares less.

His second orders, once the colts are secured and taken away by half his Centuria, are to send the other half in an attack on the Equestrians I saw today. A night assault. And because his contingent is so burdened by the youth of my village, he insists on incorporating my *contuberne* for the battle. We will not eat or sleep this night.

* * * * *

I was not disappointed that the *Centurion* chose not to lead his battle contingent. I had not expected him to.

His *Optio*, who did not bother to introduce himself by name, peremptorily demanded that we scout ahead for his city-bred soldiers. He took no notice of my rank or experience, nor of our exhausted condition after seven days in the jungle, instead specifying our line of march and the very minute we were to arrive at ambush positions. Which, of course, my scouts were expected to prepare, as Fourth Centuria had never fought in jungle before.

They had not needed to. Equestrians had never attacked the Empire from this direction, up until now preferring the more direct routes of steel and stone. I had heard much of the rail-roads and free-ways which had linked our two powers in days of peace and trade, but had no care for them... what need had my people of trade with strange and foreign beings? We had all we needed from the jungle.

Look now how this trade, this greed for Equestrian gems, has driven us to war.

When gems were rare in our lands, they were used only for the most necessary of magics. Our needs were met through inspiration. Discovery. Distilling wisdom into potions and rune-craft. The old ways may be difficult to master, but they are our own.

All this trading made magic too easy. Glib-tongues with glittering, bejeweled contraptions and wild promises captured the fancies of our more foolish leaders. What use now the idle comforts of Roam, when blood must soak the earth to maintain them? Absent such frivolities, there need never have been conflict at all.

No pirates, seizing the over-valued coal Equestria demanded. No wound to Caesar's sense of self-importance, when Equestria attacked the pirates he himself could not disperse. No embargoes, no war for the resources both sides so desperately craved. Nightmare Moon would still have been Equestria's co-regent, but subordinate to Her elder sister, and thus controlled.

Foreign entanglements. Greed and pride. They have fulfilled prophecies, more ancient than either nation. So tonight, my village is being made to pay the price.

If any greater being stands above us in judgment, how could they consider this arrangement a just one?

We push through darkness, the lush jungle where I have lived all my life now cold and forbidding around me. Tired, I find myself blundering through thickets I should know like the marriage ring snug about my right foreleg. The *Optio* snarls, comments on how stupid anyone not from the cities must be, lets slip that my armor-less spears will be at the front of the line when battle begins.

Is it wrong to ponder on how I may lead these of my nation to doom, so that my tribe may survive?

I think of my young son, Zwanna. It is only seven years since his *imbeleko*, where his father and I showed him to the spirits of his ancestors. I hope his new Legion is blessed with better commanders. I hope his father and I will be allowed by the powers that be to weep for him, in days to come.

* * * * *

The Moon is rising, dangerously full.

But that is an appetite which can never truly be sated. Not with all the blood of Equestria, not with that of the Empire. It is truly a nightmare Moon, for it no longer bears Her Face. She walks the earth this night.

When the attack begins, the Equestrians seem unable to benefit from Her cold grey light. They think their lanterns are dim enough to escape our notice. I make the mistake of thinking the *Optio* dim enough not to notice our escape.

He has refused my warriors' withdrawal; my spear is in his ribcage. The Empire is no longer my nation. The Fourth Centuria must die if my village is to live, for there is nowhere left where my people can flee. We fight like only the most desperate of traitors can, fearful and hateful now of anyone who is not us.

This night, many discover the shadowed borders of Death's realm.

For Death comes to all who fight beneath the Stars.

Youth

By Hnetu

I stared at the old unicorn mare as she slowly walked back and forth in front of the group. I stood in the middle of a line of foals just like myself. Only one colt in the group already had his cutie mark, which had me all sorts of jealous, even if it was just a hammer and nail. I looked back at the mare as she turned and started back toward my end of the group.

“Alright. Do any of you know why you’re here?” she asked. She looked from the colt who had his cutie mark, then to each one of us, before her eyes finally fell to a rest on me. Her tail snapped behind her, and she squinted. “Well?”

“To learn to shoot?” one filly offered.

“Wrong!” shouted the mare. “You are here to learn to defend yourselves. The Wasteland holds terrible things.” She stomped her hoof, then held it up. “Raiders.” She pointed at the colt with the cutie mark. “Feral ghouls.” She jabbed the hoof toward the filly who’d answered her. “Taint.” She pointed toward the filly on the far end of the line. “Radiation.” She pointed at me.

The group collectively shrunk back, and murmuring began. I knew these foals from around town. None of them were stupid enough to go running into danger without a good reason first. We’d been raised together since the town was formed, and the townspoonies were quick to remind us what lay outside the city walls.

“Fortunately for you, that does mean shooting lessons today,” explained the mare. She smiled at us, and pointed over to a collection of small caliber pistols lined up on a bench.

One foal let out a cheer, not that I knew who. I was too focused on getting the one revolver of gun lineup. Three of the five of us foals were unicorns, and I wasn’t one of them. The other was the only pegasus I’d ever seen, and she was fast. I’d need to be quick.

“Now now, I know you’re all excited. But this doesn’t mean that you get to run around playing. These are tools and can kill you if you’re not careful,” said the old unicorn. Her horn began to glow and she lifted a pistol from the bench. Hovering it in the air, she ejected the clip from the bottom and held that up too. “These bullets are just as deadly as the things out in the Wasteland you’ll be needing to protect yourselves from. If I see any roughhousing, goofing off, or pretend shooting at another member of the training class, you *will* be removed.”

The colt with the cutie mark saluted. Slowly, the rest of us followed suit until each member of the group had a hoof at their forehead.

“At ease, soldiers,” joked the teacher. She slid the magazine back into the gun and pointed it away from us. “There’s targets down around the corner. Each of you go collect a firearm and we’ll head down to practice shooting.” She hovered the pistol she held over to the pegasus foal, who took it in her teeth. I heard a quiet click. “Safeties on. Follow me.” She trotted off.

I ran, as fast as I could. Three different colors of magic wrapped around three guns before I could get anywhere close. They joked and talked amongst themselves casually while they walked toward the shooting range. Halfway there, and I watched the revolver slide through the air to the colt with the cutie mark. There went that. I slowed to a walk and grabbed the remaining pistol. It tasted of rust. Better than nothing, I supposed.

Together the five of us walked around to the shooting range. The unicorn had set up fifteen Sparkle~Cola and Sunrise Sarsaparilla bottles on a fence about ten yards away. She stood at a line painted over the dirt and looked toward us.

“Alright. How about, Shortcake. You first,” she announced. She swung her head to the side and motioned for the filly to come closer. “Stand here at this line.” When the filly did as she was told, the mare continued. “Now hold your gun here.” She wrapped her own telekinesis around Shotcake’s and forcefully moved it so she could see down the sights. “Now, use your magic to fire the gun down range. Use the sights to aim for one of the bottles.”

She looked at the older mare and then back down the range. With a soft voice, she asked, “Which do I-”

“Whichever you feel most comfortable with. They’re not going to jump out of the way,” the mare answered, cutting her off. Her magical aura disappeared and another click sounded as she removed the safety from the gun.

Shortcake spent the next solid minute aiming. Those of us waiting grew restless, but any goading got a sharp glare from the teacher and the threat of being sent home. When Shortcake finally fired, she missed.

“Eeep!” she yelped, crouching down. With a loud pop, her magic fizzled and the gun clattered to the ground. Her yellow coat turned red as she blushed. “It... It has a kick,” she sheepishly announced.

“Better a kick from the gun than a raider stabbing you, dear. Try again,” coached the unicorn mare. “Just take a deep breath, aim with the sights, and fire. You can do it.”

Shortcake fired another shot without waiting. It dug into the fencepost, but missed any of the bottles. They shook, but stayed where they were.

The mare trotted forward and crouched down beside her. “Okay, let me help,” she practically whispered. Her magic wrapped around the filly’s and she adjusted the gun. “See how the sights line up? You can see the second one between the close set? Look at it exactly like that and aim for a bottle.” She didn’t release her magic though, holding the gun steady in the filly’s magical grasp.

“O-okay,” muttered the yellow unicorn. She swallowed, and fired another shot. That one went true, and shattered the top off one of the Sunset Sarsaparilla bottles. She let out a cheer when she hit and danced around, yelling, “I did it! I did it!”

“Good job. Let’s let somepony else have a try,” said the mare. You go wait with the others. “Tumble. Your turn.”

My ears perked when I heard her call my name. I smiled around the grip on the gun and trotted forward. Finally!

“You ready for this?” asked the teacher when I got to the line.

I couldn’t really answer with a gun in my mouth, so I just nodded. Holding a gun like this made it a bit easier to aim, since I couldn’t really hold it away from my head like the unicorns could. I stared down the sights like I’d heard her explain to Shortcake.

“Okay, same thing I said to her. Just look down the sights and aim for whichever bottle you want to shoot,” she said. Her magic aura wrapped around the gun and the safety clicked off. “Go ahead.” She took a step back to let me do my thing.

It didn’t seem that hard. I could do it, easy. I kind of wished that we didn’t have to learn this stuff, but, it was now or never. Why couldn’t the wasteland just let us be foals? We had to grow up too fast, and this was my first step.

I fired.

The shot went wide. It shattered a bottle on the far right. I’d been aiming for the middle one.

“Nice shot!” announced the teacher.

“Good one,” yelled the colt. The others offered their praise as well.

It felt like I didn’t deserve the cheers though. How did my aim go that far off?

I wasn’t a markspony, that was for sure. Was it a lack of practice or just not something I was meant to be good at. I looked back at my haunches, wondering if ‘being a bad shot’ could be a special talent. No cutie mark.

“Be careful. Don’t point the gun at others,” said the teacher. She grabbed the gun in her magic and forced it toward the ground. “The last thing we need is a misfire.” The gun wrenched to the side and back toward the bottles downrange. “Two more then we switch again.”

Blushing, I aimed again.

Two shots later and another bottle lay in pieces behind the fence piece. The rest of the lesson went in a blur. I couldn’t tell if I was happy or upset. Praise I didn’t deserve for the shooting, and a rush of excitement making me shake.

For the first time I shot, I’d done pretty good right? Maybe it wasn’t me that aimed bad, maybe the gun just had bent sights? Or it might just be that I needed more practice. It took years for the city guards to get good, according to mom and dad at least. They’d explained several times, after each attempt to get my cutie mark and failing, that it would show up when it was ready. I didn’t want to wait though.

* * *

I sat on the town wall, overlooking the Wasteland with my dad. He’d offered to do a shift of guard duty to show me the ropes. We were on a ledge a ways below the top of the wall, the place where guards would pace to keep their eye out for dangers.

“So, how was the lesson?” he asked. Another earth pony like me, he had a gun strapped to his side with a battle saddle. He looked almost like a soldier in his guard getup, but with his light blue eyes, red coat, and green mane, he was still dad.

“It was okay, I guess,” I said nervously. I wanted to talk to him about what happened, but I didn’t know how to talk about it.

He looked back and forth across the barren fields and to the distance. With nothing dangerous on the horizon, he turned to me. “Just okay?” he asked.

“I hit the target, but not the one I was aiming for,” I explained. I shuffled my forehoof and looked at the ground.

“That’s better than I did my first time,” he said with a smile. “You’re still a foal, right? You can’t expect to be amazing at everything the first try.” He wrapped a leg around me and squeezed.

I hugged back. “I guess so, I just really wanted to... to...” I said, stopping when I realized I didn’t even know what I’d wanted out of it.

Dad sat next to me. He looked over the Wasteland once more, always remaining watchful. With no

threats coming, he looked over at me. “Youth is supposed to be a time for fun, not worrying about death. Take this time to try things, to learn, to explore. Your mother and I will be here to protect you. The walls are here make sure we’re all safe.” He hugged me again, then pointed a hoof out over the Wasteland. “Out there is where it’s dangerous, but you won’t need to be traipsing around the Wasteland for a while yet.”

“I know dad,” I muttered. I hated being treated like I was a little foal. I was old enough to get a cutie mark, dammit.

“Just promise me you won’t try and grow up too fast?” he requested.

“I promise, dad...” I admitted. He had a point. If I grew up too fast I’d end up with a lot more chores to do.

“Thanks. I’d be all sorts of broken up if I lost my little girl,” He said. He ruffled my short mane with a hoof, but stopped and looked up past the wall. “Go inside. Now.” I started to ask what he’d seen, but he just repeated, “Now.”

I knew that tone. Dad wasn’t in friend mode anymore, he was in dad mode. I jumped from the ledge of the wall and ran to our shack.

He was right. I should just enjoy the time I had as a foal. If I spent all my time growing up, I might miss what I actually had. I’d just end up with work and grownup problems. Even this right here, overthinking what I’d learned today, was a bit too grown up for me. Once whatever was going on outside the wall ended, I’d go find the other foals and play.

Zing!

By volrathxp

“Beware, beware you pony folk! Those leaves of blue are not a joke!”

blows on microphone

This thing on? Hello? Hello? I am proud to announce legislation outlawing Zebrica; the bombing begins in ten minutes. Heh, there we go. You're here now. Awesome. And you can hear me out there? Great. Even better.

So... a Stable dweller, an alicorn, and a nightstalker all walk into a bar. The bartender says “Hey! We don't serve your kind here!” The nightstalker saunters up and puts on a top hat and a monocle and says “I'm terribly sorry old chap. I'll have them wait outside while I have a spot of tea.”

crickets

Okay, so not the greatest joke I've ever told, so sue me. Wait, don't do that. I don't want to be sued... whatever that is. Moving on. I suppose you want to know a little bit more about me, eh? Well, alright then. My name is Lame Joke, and my special talent is comedy. That's right, comedy. I'm a funny pony. I tell jokes. Like the one about the ghoulish who was losing his mind, literally!

crickets

Alright, alright. So I'm not that funny. I get it. There's a reason my name is Lame Joke, after all. But enough about me, let's start off with some fart jokes. Everypony loves fart jokes, right?

Hey why are you leaving?! Stop that. Sit down for a minute, wouldja? Listen, I'll make you a little bet, alright? I'll bet you that I can get ya, yeah get ya really good. So sit back, and I'll tell ya little story. It's the story of my life, really. A story of my search... for the Killer Joke.

That's right. The Killer Joke. The big one. The one joke in the history of the Equestrian Wasteland that will cause anypony's sides to immediately split in laughter. You see, I lived in the west end of the city of Trottingham. It's a shit hole, let me tell you. Just about the worst place one could live, but that's what you get when your home is an irradiated Wasteland full of unspeakable horrors. A long time ago, there was this big war between the ponies and the zebras, and they just blew the place all to hell.

I guess that's why my special talent is in comedy. When I was growing up, I had to make do with just my ma and me. Ma loved me an' all, but I was a little funny in the head as a colt. I had this stutter, still do occasionally. Anywho, my ma worked at this bar just outside of the city. Nice little place, still there too. I do my show there three times a week even! So, back to my story. I mean, I'm sure you're enjoying yourself, but c'mon, there's better things to do with your time than to listen to a cracked up old jokester like me.

Ma left me to my own devices one day while she was waitersin' and I got a little too curious for my own good. I somehow ended up finding the kitchen, and was highly interested in the most gorgeous

looking pie I'd ever laid my eyes on. Well... one thing led to another, and the next minute I know I'm rolling out all in front of the bar on a series of rolling pins, you know the things you beat flour with. The pie of all things lands on my face. Then dead silence. Out of nowhere somepony starts laughing and pretty soon the entire bar is roaring at the sight of my pie plastered mug. Lo and behold, I got my cutie mark that day: a mask with a giant grin on its face. It was the happiest day of my life, lemme tell ya.

So... back to the Killer Joke. I'm not kiddin' about this one. It's the big time folks. And let me tell you something: I found it. And this is how.

I was busy rounding up the last of my set. Phil's Bar was pretty low on guests that evenin', only Old Jack in the corner curled up with a bottle of his favorite poison. I delivered the final line, and took a few bows to the crickets before stepping off stage. I made my way to the bar where Philophus, the goat bartender and owner of Phil's Bar, was spit-cleaning a set of glasses. I shuddered. I drank out of those occasionally!

"Phil, that's gross," I said, taking a seat at the bar.

"What? You want me to use the water?" The goat spat at me, pointing at a bucket of water near the end of the bar. It was bubbling with radioactive goodness. I think if I'd have had one of those fancy PipBuck thingamajigs it'd be clicking like mad at the moment. I shuddered even more.

"No, you're good. Just a beer I guess," I said. Phil sighed, grabbing a bottle from under the counter. I popped the lid off with my teeth (easier said than done when you're an earth pony like myself) and took a swig. It was warm, but tingled as it trickled down my throat. "That's the stuff. So... good show tonight, eh?"

"It sucked. Like always, Lame," Phil replied. He spat in another glass, taking a dirty rag to the inside of it. By the time he was done it was filthier than when he started.

"Hey, just because you didn't like it don't mean it ain't funny," I said. "I don't see you complainin' when I actually do bring in business." Phil rolled his eyes.

"It's not like this place costs a whole lot to begin with," he said, peering over at Old Jack. The elderly earth pony had been coming to Phil's for about as long as I can remember. His place was always at the far end of the bar, where he'd drink til he fell asleep, then wake up and repeat the process all over again. I still don't know how he hadn't croaked yet. I think Phil just started giving him free booze after he realized he wasn't going anywhere.

"Well, don't worry too much Phil. One of these days, I'll be the best comedian in the Wasteland, and I'll buy you a fancy new place with all 'dem caps," I said, taking another swig of my beer.

"Oh, right. The ultimate gasser. You've been going on about that for the past six years, Joke. It don't exist. Ain't no such thing," Phil replied.

"There is too, Phil! I'll swear on my ma's grave, Luna bless her soul," I said. Phil snorted.

“Your ma ain't dead, stupid,” he said. “She's in back, stocking. Remember?”

“Oh. Right,” I said, pinning my ears back sheepishly. I kicked back the rest of the beer, grinning. “Tonight could be the night, Phil. I could find it just around the corner!”

“Yeah, yeah. Keep on dreamin, Joke. Now get in back and help your ma finish the stocking. You can leave after that,” the goat said. I nodded, depositing the beer into the trash can as I made my way towards the back room behind the bar. A grunting noise caught my attention. At the far end of the back room stood my ma. Ma was an earth pony like me, with a faded red coat and a purplish mane. She was busy lifting a crate of alcohol up onto a shelf. I stepped up next to her and lifted the next crate, setting it gently on the shelf.

“How'd your show go?” She said, grabbing a bottle out of the next crate and cracking it open. She took a long draw off of it.

“Went alright. I've got a good feelin' about my material lately, ma,” I said. Ma smiled softly.

“So nopony showed up,” she said. I sighed, resting my head against her neck.

“Nope,” I said sullenly. Ma placed a hoof on my shoulder, patting me lightly.

“Don't worry, sweetheart, you'll get a crowd one of these days,” she said. “You just have to keep at it.”

“I don't know... Ma... what if I'm not cut out for this. I mean, what if my cutie mark is wrong? What if I'm not supposed to be a comedian?” I said, the weight of the world catching up with me and reality setting in.

“Honey... you have to believe in yourself. I do. You'll always be my funny little boy,” my ma replied, nuzzling me close. I smiled. Ma always knew what to say to make me feel better. She was good at that. We sat there for a few moments in silence before getting back to the rest of the crates.

Our work was interrupted by a sudden crash from the front room of the bar. There was shouting, and then gunshots. My eyes widened as I glanced over at Ma. She motioned for me to hide behind a large stack of wine crates. She pleaded with me silently as the door to the back room started to open. I pushed behind the crates and sat there.

“Just one back here, boss,” I heard a voice say.

“Well, well. Lookee what we got here boys. That is a fine piece of flank if I ever saw one,” a darker, grating voice said.

“What do you want?” Ma said. “Who are you?”

“Shut up,” the voice replied. “Boys, take her. She's coming with us. She ain't a unicorn, but she'll do.” My eyes widened. I wanted to jump out, but I couldn't see anything and if they were armed... I wasn't a fighter, I was a comic. I could assault them with pies and cake, but put a gun in my hooves and I had no clue.

“Wait, what are you doing? Get off me!” Ma shouted. I cringed at the sound of her voice.

“Put her in the cart, and let's get going. We need to get down to Ponyville to offload this mess of slaves to Red Eye's group or he's gonna be pissed,” the voice said. *Slavers...* I thought. I'd always heard horror stories about ponies being captured by brutal slavers who sold them into service to sick and disgusting ponies who did everything from violate to murder their slaves. I couldn't let that happen to Ma. I mean, she was my Ma!

A click sound indicated that the door had closed. I'd been so scared and shivering behind the crates that I hadn't been able to even move. I launched out into the back room heading towards the door. I pulled it open quietly, peering out into the bar. Phil was splayed out on the bar, his blood spilling onto the hardwood floor below. Old Jack was still in his corner, sound asleep. The attackers, whoever they were, hadn't even bothered to kill him. The front door to the bar was wide open and I heard Ma screaming from outside. Her screams and shouts were getting fainter by the moment.

I moved over to the elderly stallion's side, shaking him hard. His eyes opened blearily and he yawned, looking up at me.

“Joke? Show over? I missed it again didn't I?” He said.

“Jack, we've gotta problem here! Somepony killed Phil and took Ma. We gotta get her back!” I shouted. The stallion grimaced, looking past me at Phil's body. He sighed.

“Fucking slavers,” he said. “All that blood's gonna ruin the booze.”

“What do we do, Jack? What do we do?” I said frantically. The stallion sighed and slapped me hard across the face with his hoof. I blinked at the contact, stopping immediately.

“First things first, you stop yer panicking,” the old stallion said. “Second. Didja hear at all where they was heading?”

“Whoever it was said something about Ponyville,” I said. Jack's eyes shot wide open.

“Shit. If they're selling her to Ponyville... we gotta get there,” he said.

“What's so bad about Ponyville?” I asked, my insides turning inside out as I waited for the stallion to answer. He stood, and pushed himself back from the bar.

“Ponyville's a raider town, son. She won't survive. She'll be eaten alive,” he said. The stallion stumbled around the bar, pushing on Phil's body and causing the dead goat to fall to the ground. He grunted. “Sorry, Phil. Kinda need this.” He reached under the bar, lifting out a rifle. I'd seen that rifle many times before. Phil kept it for protection, not that he really needed it. We never got enough of a crowd to warrant it. Jack slung the rifle over his shoulder blade.

“Jack, what are you doing?” I said as the stallion walked by.

“Gonna go git your ma back, son. You sit tight now,” Jack replied. I stepped forward, placing a hoof up to stop him.

“You can't do that,” I said. “They'll kill you!” Jack snorted.

"I'm more than capable of takin' care of myself, youngin'. Besides, your ma's a good gal. She don't deserve that," the old stallion said. I stomped a hoof.

"I'm coming with you," I said.

"Son, you're not a fighter. You're a jokester. You wouldn't last five seconds out there," Jack said. "Now go on. I'll be back with your ma, don't you worry." He pushed past me and went out the open door. I stood there, my front knees shaking and knocking together. Jack was right. I wasn't a fighter. I only tried to ever make ponies laugh. But I had to do something. I had to help my ma. I couldn't let her just... I couldn't even think about it.

I grimaced as I walked up the stairs to my room where my stuff was. I opened up my trunk, selecting a few things that I might be able to use. A joke buzzer here, a rubber chicken there, and even a cased up banana cream pie. Yes... I could do something with these. I pulled my things into my saddlebags and took one last look at my room. It was likely the last time I'd ever see it. I put on a grimace of determination and stared out my window.

"Let's get comedic," I said.

You ever wonder just how hard it is to keep track of a pony when you have no idea where you're going yourself? Really bucking hard, that's how hard. I had thought that maybe Old Jack would move slowly, being as old as he was, but as it turns out the elderly stallion was still quick on his hooves. Still, he hadn't seen me yet. I followed along, glancing around nervously as the hillside surrounding Trottingham came into view.

A road made of broken rubble and debris was our path out of the city proper. Dead grass and even deader trees littered the Wasteland. My hooves were starting to hurt from all the walking by the time that Jack stopped the first time. In the distance past the stallion, I could see a few lights that appeared to be a few fires. *The slaver caravan?* I thought as I made myself scarce, hiding behind a big pile of rocks.

After several hours of waiting, the stallion began to move again, and I followed. I wasn't sure where we were going. My hooves still hurt quite a bit, but I did what I could to soldier on. Old Jack would stop from time to time, watching the caravan intently. The rolling gray fields were quickly replaced with large amounts of flat lands, with patches of brown grass interspersed with dirt. There was the occasional broken tree, but no cover for miles. I began to grow increasingly worried that Jack would see me, or worse... the caravan would see the both of us. Nothing happened though. The plains eventually sloped down into a large valley, and I could see where the caravan was headed.

Sitting at the edge of a massive forest (that was actually green!) was a tiny hamlet nestled in the valley. There was smoke emanating from one of the buildings. Jack stopped just atop a tiny ridge, watching the slaver caravan intently. I grimaced as I got closer to the ridge. Jack suddenly spoke.

"Kid, if you're so intent on followin' me you might as well come down," he said. He turned and looked straight at me. I'm still not sure how he saw me through my disguise. I'm guessing the big nose and mustache with the black-rimmed glasses wasn't exactly the best way to conceal myself. I trotted down

the ridge in front of him.

“How long have you known?” I asked. Jack snorted.

“Fuck, I knew the moment I left,” he replied. “I knew you couldn't resist coming to get your ma.”

“So why didn't you say something?” I said. Jack pointed down the ridge at the hamlet.

“See that? Ponyville. Those fucks are gonna offload their slaves here for Red Eye's operation,” the older stallion said. “That's gonna be our best chance at getting' your ma out. We're gonna need a distraction... so I'm kind of glad you came along.”

“What do you mean?” I said, blinking. Jack grinned widely.

“My boy, you're gonna go introduce yourself to the locals, and you're gonna put on the greatest comedy show of your lifetime,” he said. My eyes widened.

“But you said it yourself, they're raiders!” I said. “You know... bad evil ponies who kill other ponies!”

“That's why you need a better disguise. They won't attack you if they think you're one of them,” Jack said. “You get in there and put on your show, and while they're all distracted I'll sneak in and free your ma. We'll meet in the forest outside of the town. They'll never find us there.”

“But what if they try and kill me? What if they try and EAT me?!” I said frantically. “My jokes aren't that great!”

“Relax, kid. Raiders are simple minded. Just go with some fart jokes. Those stupid fucks will laugh at anything,” Jack replied. “Now get over here. Let's see what you got in your bags.” I nodded silently and trotted over to the old stallion.

Over the next half hour we dug everything I'd brought with me out of my bags, which had inadvertently been my entire supply of comedy supplies. I'd scavenged a lot since I'd realized my special talent, and it showed. Most of my junk came from Ministry of Morale warehouses, wherein I'd spent most of my time running away from those crazy spritebot things. Still, I'd managed to collect many things that I thought would be funny for my routines.

Jack worked silently, yanking anything to the side we didn't need. Thanks to a little mane gel (a stallion's gotta look his best on stage after all) and some fake blood (routine with a chicken. Don't ask), I was starting to look more and more like a bloodthirsty raider. When Jack was reasonably pleased with the disguise, he thrust the rest of my things back into my bags and sent me on my way. I trotted down the ridge towards the tiny village, my fear increasing even more when I saw a row of pony heads impaled upon several pikes next to a bridge that led into the hamlet. I watched carefully as I made my way to the bridge, hoping this was going to work.

BANG

A gunshot came out of nowhere, causing me to jump out of my skin to the side. I glanced up, seeing a smoking rifle poking out of the trees. After checking to make sure my insides were staying inside, I looked down at the smoking hole in the ground in front of me.

“Come any closer you fuck, and I'll shoot your brains outta your skull,” a voice said, pausing for a moment. “Actually, maybe I'll just shoot you anyways. Add you to my little collection out here.” I was starting to panic internally, but I had to do something. I had to keep my cool, or ma would be dead... and so would I.

“Oh, hey there!” I said cheerfully, waving. “Look, I don't got any problem here now do I? I mean, I'm a raider and all.”

There was a pause. I could have sworn I heard cursing under the pony's breath. “You. You're a raider.”

“Yup!” I said, smiling as wide as I could. “I mean, just look at me! I'm bloody! And covered in shit! And I got this sweet mane do! Totally a raider. I came down to Ponyville cuz I heard it was awesome for raiders. Cuz I'm a raider.” I heard rustling from the trees as a tan unicorn jumped out from the canopy. His eyes were bloodshot and his mane ragged. On his flank I could see a pair of crosshairs. I cringed at what his special talent could be. His rifle floated in his magic as he locked his eyes on me. After several excruciating moments of silence, he dropped it to his side.

“And you've come to the right place, new fish. Ponyville raiders are the best kind of raiders. Come on, follow me,” he said. I nodded, gulping loudly as I followed behind the unicorn. *What have I gotten myself into?* I thought frantically, before remembering why I was here. *Oh, right. Ma. I'm gonna get you out of here ma! If it's the last thing I do!*

“So... what do you guys do for fun around here? Besides the killing and mutilating and traumatizing we raiders loooove to do?” I said casually as I trotted along next to the tan unicorn. He grumbled under his breath and sighed heavily.

“Look, just... just shut your mouth until we get to the boss,” he said. “He'll tell you what to do.” I grimaced as we passed over the bridge into the town. I was awestruck by what the years of decay and desecration had done to the town of Ponyville. What must have once been a thriving little community before the war was now a shithole. Still, it was better looking than Trottingham on a good day.

We made our way into the town square, where several large cages had been set up. Each one held several dozen ponies. I nearly cried when I saw Ma. She was in the back of one of the cages, her head held low and crying. Her mane looked like it'd been torn to pieces and she had a nasty looking cut on her neck.

“Hey,” the unicorn said. He must have caught me staring. “Stop eying the merchandise.”

“What... what are they for?” I asked. The unicorn shrugged.

“Fuck if I know. Boss told us we're not allowed to kill them. Says they belong to Red Eye's ponies,” he replied. “It's hard too. I just wanna... I wanna gut them like the little fishies they are and spread out their entrails...” He was foaming at the mouth literally by the time he was done with his tirade.

“You... You alright there?” I asked. “You uh... don't have a whole lot of other fun, do you?”

“Huh? I'm fine,” the unicorn replied, his mad grin lessening. “And what do you mean other fun? I

have lots of fun.”

“You know... laughing. Good times. I'm a comedian, or at least I was before I became a raider,” I said, cringing at my next choice of words. “I mean... entrails. They're funny, right?” The unicorn blinked twice at me.

“Entrails? They're HILARIOUS!” The raider shouted. “Now come on, we're wasting time. We need to get you to the boss, comedian.” I tried to grin, nodding frantically as I followed behind him. Within moments we arrived at what I can probably describe as the most horrifying place I'd ever seen. It was a tree house. Well, a tree library I suppose you could call it. It was burnt black in several places, the branches ending in charred sticks. There were no leaves on them, and there was blood EVERYWHERE. It covered the outside, pooling into a rivulet that soaked into the ground to the side of the massive library. An old broken down sign sat in front. I couldn't make out the words on it.

The other raider walked up casually, pushing the door open and leading me inside. If the outside of this building was horrifying, the inside was vile and wretched and insane. Bodies of ponies littered the walls, some of them pinned up in macabre poses. Many of them appeared to have been engaged in sexual acts, all while missing body parts and skin. In the center of the room, laying on one of the tables was a dead pony, his entrails splayed out for all to see.

I will admit, that it wasn't one of my better moments. I threw up. You know. Heaved, prayed to the porcelain alicorn, blew chunks, that sort of thing. Unfortunately, it was all over the unicorn next to me. He growled loudly at me, covered completely in my vomit. He was about to rip my head off before a voice stopped us both.

“STOP!” The voice shouted. I glanced up, seeing a dark navy colored earth pony wearing spiked barding and a slicked up mohawk for a mane. His eyes were crazed. “Stitch, get the fuck out of here. Go clean up, make one of the slaves lick that shit off you. I'm gonna talk to our queasy friend here.” The unicorn looked over at me, growling again before turning back.

“Sorry boss,” he said, pushing the door open and leaving the library. I was shaking in my hooves as the other pony in the room trotted up next to me.

“So, think you're a raider, huh? Think you got what it takes to be a badass? To be one of my crew?” He said. I nodded feebly. The raider leader snorted. “Fuck, look at you. You're the worst fuckin' raider I've ever seen! Raiders don't blow their chunks all over at the sight of a little blood! So...” He grinned widely, pulling out a jagged knife out of his side pocket. Within mere seconds the blade was at my throat. “Why don't you tell me who the fuck you are, and what the fuck you're doing here?”

“I... I'm just a comedian, sir... I tell jokes,” I said weakly. The raider leader's eyes glinted, hinting that he was more intelligent than the rest of his brazen brethren. He stopped and then roared in laughter.

“A fuckin' comedian?! Are you fuckin' kiddin' me?” He shouted. “C'mon then, comedian. Tell me a joke, and make it a good one.” He pressed the knife in a little, giving just enough pressure to make me squeak. “Or it'll be your fuckin' last.” My eyes almost rolled out of my head and I very nearly fainted. I wasn't quite sure what kept me on my hooves. I swallowed hard.

“Umm... okay. Why did the raider cross the street?” I said. The raider leader stared at me. I took another swallow and finished the joke. “To gut the fucker on the other side?” I waited, and waited,

and waited some more for a reaction. The raider leader merely stared at me, and then suddenly the knife was gone. The raider leader started chuckling loudly.

“Too right, my friend. Too right. Alright, I like you. You can stay. But don't piss me off, or I will gut you like the stupid fuck in your joke, you got it?” He said. I nodded frantically. “Good. Go clean off and get ready for a show. The boys could use a little entertainment.” I swallowed again.

“Where... where should I go?” I said softly.

“The old schoolhouse. They've got a stage out back. It's pretty fuckin' busted, but it'll work for your show. Just be there in three hours,” the raider leader said. “Now get the fuck out of my sight. It's getting hard just lookin' at ya.” I nodded again and made for the door as fast as possible, nearly slipping on some blood on my way out. The leader of the raiders laughed again uproariously as I pushed open the door and stepped outside.

I stood there for a few good moments, trying to process what had just happened. Had I just agreed to put on a comedy show for a bunch of raiders?

There was no doubt about it. I was going to die.

After leaving the library I'd managed to hang low and find the schoolhouse where I was to perform my comedy show. I'd caught several glimpses of Ma while watching the raiders mill about the town square. It was strange, watching ponies I'd always been told were vicious, bloodthirsty killers. I hadn't seen the unicorn I'd thrown up on, but several other raiders were hanging around a table that had practically every kind of chem one could imagine. Having been around Phil's for as long as I was, I'd seen my fair share of the things. Tubes of Jet, Stampede, and bottles of Buck rested on the table, being downed in insane quantities by the raiders. How did they even stay alive after that much?

I decided that it was best of me to stay out of their way and try and put on the best show I possibly could, so I holed myself up in a large gaudy building with a sign out front that identified it as a boutique. I found a broken tall mirror and began to practice my jokes on it. After I was reasonably pleased with the performance, I left.

Three hours later, I found myself standing behind a broken down old stage at the rear of the old Ponyville schoolhouse. The curtains were tattered and stained, while the stage itself had several holes in it. Regardless, somehow the raiders had managed to rig up a microphone. I briefly wondered what else they'd used this stage for as I walked up the stairs. Reddish brown stains all over told me all that I needed to know.

The raiders were all gathered for this. Word got around quick, and pretty soon every raider in the entire town was present and accounted for. I hoped and prayed this meant that the slaves weren't being watched closely enough that Jack could get Ma out. I tried not to think about that old drunkard of an earth pony croaking up on that ridge. I gulped softly as I stepped up to the microphone, tapping it with my forehoof. I set my bags down beside me for when I would need them.

“Uh... hello,” I said, hearing my voice reverberate throughout the clearing. The raiders stopped what they were doing all at once and glared at me. I very nearly wet myself. The raiders all looked at me

intently, so I figured the best thing to do was to soldier on and start the show. “Uh... well then. I'm Lame Joke. Nice to be here, I just flew in from Trottingham and boy are my legs tired!”

Silence. Absolute silence. I chuckled nervously and launched right into the next part of the routine.

“Right, so who's up for a little knock knock jokes? Eh? Alright, so... Knock, Knock?” I said. The crowd was still completely silent. I grimaced and pitched my voice up a bit. “Who's there?” “Raider!” “Raider who?” “Raider to eat you!”

crickets

Man... tough crowd, alright I need to break out the big guns! I thought as I racked my brain for something to talk about. I needed something that would appeal to their base senses, something... violent!

“So... a raider, a slaver, and a slave enter a bar. The bartender says 'You can't have your slave in here! Get him out!' So the raider cuts off the slave's head! And then proceeds to murder the rest of the bar,” I said, a massive grin on my face.

Utter and complete silence again. The leader of the raiders was now staring daggers at me. *Geez! What's with these ponies?! Can't catch a break worth nothing around here!* I decided that I'd have to get a little avant garde.

“Okay, so... three tomatoes are walkin' down the street. A papa tomato, a mama tomato, and a baby tomato. The baby tomato starts laggin' behind, and the papa tomato starts getting really angry,” I started. “So, the papa tomato goes back and smooshes the baby tomato and says 'Ketchup!’”

I closed my eyes and I prayed, harder than I ever had before. Then I heard laughter. It was a chuckle at first, but that chuckle led to a chortle, and that chortle led to a snicker, and finally it broke into uproariously loud laughing that reverberated all around me. I opened my eyes again to see that the raiders were rolling in their seats with laughter. I'd done it!! I could only hope that I'd been keeping the raiders distracted enough that they wouldn't notice –

“Somepony's lettin' the slaves out!!!” A voice shouted. One of the raiders rushed up to the group. It was clear that he hadn't been sitting out in the crowd. The raider leader stopped laughing immediately and glared at him.

“What?!” He shouted. I grimaced under the spotlight, well if there'd actually been a spotlight.

“The slaves are loose! Some old fart pony! He killed Knifey!” The other raider said. Knifey, really? Were Wasteland ponies that terrible at names? The raider leader growled.

“Well, then let's fucking get him!” He roared.

“Umm... boss, they're headed into the Everfree. We can't go in there,” the raider guard replied. I started to shift towards the back of the stage, ready to flee at a moment's notice.

“You'll go after them or I'll force feed you your entrails on a silver platter!” The leader said before turning his head right at me, noticing that I was trying to escape. “And where the fuck do you think

you're going?!"

"Umm, gotta go, have a great night everypony I'll be here all week!" I squeaked as I rushed off the stage and started sprinting across the square. My Ma and Jack were in the forest, and I had to get there. The raiders began to shout and cry out after me. Gunshots echoed across the square and dust kicked up underneath my hooves.

"Get that fuck!" The raider leader shouted as his hoof beats pounded the ground beneath him. I shrieked in terror, jumping up and over a small fence that was in my way as I tried to get to the forest. The massive greenery loomed above me as I made it to the entrance. I'd never seen such lush green trees before in my life. Was this someplace that wasn't affected by the radiation? Had the war simply not occurred here?

I didn't have much time to ponder on the forest before shots and shouts pulled my attention back to the here and now. I grimaced as I stopped at a fork in the path. I decided I was going to need to lose them somehow. I growled, stomping forward off the path and into the underbrush. It was the only way I was going to get out of this alive. I panted hard, having never ran that heavily in my entire life.

Finally, the shouts died away, replaced by the sounds of the dark forest. I looked around, seeing nothing but darkness for miles. Trees and brush surrounded me, locking me in. I nearly tripped on a root, but was able to regain my footing and continue on.

"Ma?! Old Jack?!" I called out to nothingness. The sounds of crickets and the forest mocked my every movement. I was scared. Had I gone the wrong way? I kept going forward, figuring that eventually I had to hit the end of the forest and then I could double back around and find Ma and Jack. Then we could go home and be happy again. I so desperately wanted that.

I managed to push through to a clearing, elated to finally be free of the underbrush. The clearing was idyllic, lit by moonlight and home to a lovely field of vines with blue petaled flowers. I sighed and sat at the edge of it, taking a breather. I closed my eyes.

"I did it," I said aloud without thinking. "I told a great joke! I really did it. Maybe I am cut out for this comedy stuff!" I sighed again. I knew I could do it, if I really just kept at it. I just knew it!

A slithering sound dropped me out of my reverie. I opened my eyes and spun around, looking for the source. Nothing.

"Hello?" I called out. "Anypony there?" Another slithering sound echoed from behind me. I turned around again, my eyes widening as I saw a vine coming towards my face. The blue flowers on it seemed to be taunting me as it wrapped around my face.

And then... I saw nothing.

"So... that's my story, and I'm sticking to it... but the story doesn't exactly end there, now does it?" I say, grinning widely. "No... it definitely doesn't. After I woke up... well, I guess... after my eyes reopened that is... I was... well... different."

A vine slithers through the underbrush, caressing the leg of the pony. He squirms, tries to get away. I don't really understand why. After all, I'm just a comedian. A jester. I make ponies laugh, not cry.

“Oh now don't try and get away... you're ruining the fun,” I say. “And I was having so much fun, you know that... right?”

The pony tries to scream, but he can't. A vine is wrapped around his mouth, preventing it. I frown.

“All I wanted was somepony to listen to my show... You see... I never did see Ma or Old Jack ever again. I don't even know if they made it out of the forest alive,” I say, waving a vine in the air. “But I did get to find the ultimate joke. Oh yes... I truly did.”

The pony tries to scream louder, but its muffled cries can't be heard through the vine. Tears are streaming down the pony's eyes.

“Oh... and about our little bet... I bet that I would get ya, didn't I?” I say, my razor sharp teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

“Well... looks like I got ya.”

A crunch, a scream, and then finally... silence.

Ending

By G-Man64

“And that’s that,” I said, closing the book. “From Apathy to Zing. A to Z. All twenty-six stories. What did you think?” The filly looked up at me, a grin creeping along her face from ear to ear. Just like Twilight. Goddesses, I missed her so. But ponies like this little one were keeping her legendary voraciousness for knowledge alive and well.

“What did I think? What did I think? That was awesome!” She exclaimed loudly nearly knocking me from my seat. There was a long time ago that such a sound would have sent me scurrying, but I had long since faced that fear. The filly was bouncing with glee. “Thank you so much Miss Fluttershy. Do you think any of those ponies are still around?”

“Well... we may never know,” I said. “They’re recorded in this book, but for all we know they may never have even existed. Just the imaginings of somepony looking to entertain others. But... even stories of imagination have a ring of truth to them.” The filly stopped, looking down at the ground for a moment. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“Do... do you think anypony will remember me, Miss Fluttershy?” she said. I could see the tears starting to form in her eyes. This was bothering her something fierce. I wasn’t quite sure what to tell her.

“Well...” I finally managed to muster, “I’ll always remember you.”

“I’m serious, Miss Fluttershy!” The filly cried out, stamping on the ground. I smiled softly, resting a hoof on her shoulder.

“Sweetie... ponies will remember you, if you go do something worth remembering,” I said. “Be generous, and kind, and always stand up for yourself and your friends. Especially your friends.”

“I... I see,” the filly said, clearing her would-be tears. “Do you think if I do something big, I’d end up in a book?” I smiled again. So... not just like Twilight, then. Sure, she had Twilight’s appetite for reading, but she wanted to be recognized... like Dash. I shook my thoughts from my head. I really needed to stop comparing random fillies to my long-dead friends.

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “If you go out and do something worth remembering, you promise me that you’ll come back and let me know if you do... I’ll make sure you’re in a book, because I’ll write it for you, okay?” The filly’s smile lit up.

“Thanks, Miss Fluttershy!” The filly said. “I’d better get going so I can get started!” she trotted towards

the door, and I couldn't help but notice the flash on her flank.

"Umm, sweetie?" I said, stopping her. The filly looked back at her flank and grinned widely. Instead of bare fur there was now the image of a brown book. On the cover of the book was the symbol of two alicorns circling a star.

"Ohmygosh, ohmygosh! My cutie mark!" The filly shouted jumping up and down. "What do you think my special talent is?!"

"It means," I said proudly. "That you just got the first chapter of your own story. The day you discovered your fate, to become a true Wasteland legend." I smiled widely, pushing open the door.

"Now go on, you have a lot to do."