

BLADE TROTTER



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CHAPTER ONE

“Welcome to Manehattan, Phelps,” said Commissioner Dick Maneson, his hoof extended cordially to me from over his desk.

“It’s an honor to be here, Sir.” I replied, leaning out of my own seat to shake his hoof.

The Commissioner was an older stallion, his mane was graying from what I could guess was years of stress coupled with smoking. Though his words were friendly enough I could see that he was a serious sort. There was an air about it him that made the room feel heavy and tense. His mouth seemed strained from the smile he gave me, as if he were unused to using his muscles in such a way. He looked more like a manticore than a pony, the only indication being his distinct lack of claws and fresh pressed work suit.

“I don’t think I need to tell you this, Colt, but you’re in the big league. You’re a Blade Trotter now,” Maneson continued as he reclined in his seat.

“I understand Commissioner,” I said with a nod, which he seemed to like.

As a Blade Trotter it was now my job to take down and retire rogue Reponants, pondroids that were designed to look and sound like any other pony... almost. No matter what they said or did, they were still just machines. Creations made by ponies for ponies. Some would say retiring was killing, but let me ask you this: Can you kill a machine? No, of course not. It’s like a computer: it breaks down - it retires. It was never living, so how could it possibly die? The very thought made me laugh.

In my time on the force I had had a few run ins with Reponants, rogues that the Blade Trotters back in Filly didn’t track in time. Retiring was nothing new to me and it was probably the reason I was promoted. I had a reputation for getting the job done and done well. Now I had to live up to that reputation in a new home, in a new office with new faces. It was a bit overwhelming but it wasn’t like I really had much back in Fillydelphia to miss. All in all, the move would do me some good.

“How are you with a partner?” Commissioner Maneson asked suddenly, lighting up a cigarette and placing it in his mouth as he waited for my response.

“I’ve never really had to work with others much.” I hated partners.

He stared at me for a moment, puffing out a few smoke rings before finally saying, “Well, from now on, you will.”

Maneson paused for a moment, taking a long puff from his cigarette. He seemed concentrated and conflicted while calling his secretary.

“Yes, is she all set? Good. I’ll send him over straight away.” Putting the phone down, he set his eyes back on me. “I’m sending you on a little trip, Phelps.”

“Where to?” I asked quickly.

“To meet your new partner... well sort of. She’ll be more of an assistant. From there we’ll get you set up for your first case.” He quickly scribbled a note and passed it to me. “That’s where you’ll go to meet her.”

“What’s her name?”

“Clockwork. Does the name ring a bell?” Maneson replied, the tone in his voice hinted he was less than happy to deal with the mare in question.

“Hasn’t she been missing ever since-” I started, but he cut me short.

“Yeah, yeah. Point is she’s not hiding anymore but you’ll find all that out in time. Go on Colt, get a move on it.”

“Yes sir!”

Jumping out of my seat and grabbing my Voight-Clon Empathy Test supplies I was quick to move out of the musky office and out toward my destination. I didn’t know what to think about the end of my conversation with the Police Commissioner. Anypony that kept track of the news knew about Doctor Clockwork. She was the scientist commissioned to create

some of the first Reponants that we all know about today, and the whole reason we even needed Blade Trotters. Needless to say, anypony in law enforcement knew her name and didn't like it. These machines had no reason to be free thinking or as powerful as they were.

Walking through the streets of Manehattan reminded me of how bleak life in Equestria had become. The tall buildings were like the crumbling carcasses of giants, looming over city as a reminder of how fragile we were against the slow push of time. Equestria hadn't been ready for war, and in wake of victory we had still lost. The ground had become a wasteland, and pollution took it's toll on the sky. No pony was without their own strife. United we fought, united we withered away.

I was so young when everything went to hell. I had only just gotten my cutie mark. Imagine that - learning what your place in the world was while all you knew began to collapse? I never got a chance to fight for Equestria, the war was long over by the time I was old enough. Still, I took pride in the silver badge that I earned on my flank and worked hard to earn a real badge from the Fillydelphia PD as soon as I was old enough. That was about the time pondroids started to hit the market. They were ridiculously popular with Project Dawn - a huge restoration project that aimed to rebuild from the ashes. It seemed like a great idea at the time; Reponants could work longer shifts for no bits. It seemed like it was just a blink of an eye that the Reponants became more and more pony-like - they could even think on their own. The only thing they lacked was emotion and that's where the problems started.

The Reponants could think but not feel. Before long the worker droids were causing all sorts of problems for us ponies. Revolts started and measures were taken to stop the rogues. Project Dawn was halted and all Nexus model 5 Reponants were reprogrammed or destroyed. The egg heads were all in a huff over this, of course. I wonder if they'd have felt differently if it was them the Reponants were killing off in the massacre. Either way, Reponants were banned on the ground after that and only available on the Celestial Moon Colonies. Project Dawn had pretty much failed thanks to those hunks of scrap metal and efforts to colonize the moon began to take priority while Equestria was left to rot.

It was not long before I found myself at my destination, Blueblood Industries. Even while my “partner” had been gone, the company’s CEO, Prince Cornelius Blueblood IV, continued to produce a new line of Reponants to the markets. The headlines featured Blueblood calling the models, ‘More pony than pony!’ Which when translated to us in the Police Departments as, ‘The Voight-Clop test won’t work anymore, fuckers.’

As I entered the building I felt incredibly small compared to the large stone pillars and statues towering over me. Everything was clean and some spotless shade of white, making me feel dirty by comparison. The whole place seemed unreal, my hooves echoing through the halls. Every noise I made felt loud and clumsy over the natural hum of the walls. At the end of the front hall was a sleek and white reception desk with a small lamp, computer and a potted ficus that I could only guess was a synthetic. I couldn’t imagine having enough bits to buy a real plant and leave it out in the open like that where anypony waltzing in could just snatch it up. Maybe there was some sort of security in place? I sure as hell didn’t see it, or anypony for that matter.

“Hello?” I called out, hoping for some sort of response. My own voice echoed back, as if to respond to me in the emptiness, “I’m Colt Phelps with the MPD Blade Trotter Division.”

“Who?” I heard another voice finally respond.

“Colt Phelps, I’m with the Manehattan Police Department,” I called out again, speaking more firmly for them to hear me now.

“WHO?” was all I heard back from the voice.

“COLT PHELPS!” I shouted back in frustration, my name and voice bounced back in an almost harmonic rhythm until it dissipated into silence.

It was at this time I heard something odd coming from down a hall. It was soft and wispy, not the familiar clopping of hooves to the cool stone tile. Looking up I realized who, or rather, what I had been yelling at. It was a brown colored Owl with a carrot colored beak and talons. He, or at least I thought it was a he, swooped down from above and landed gently on the front desk with a few hops added to get a better look at me. His eyes were tiny, beady things that were darker than the night sky - or at least one of

them was. The left eye was clearly damaged with a scar that prevented new feathers from growing in.

“Whoooooooooooo!” it repeated, as if it meant to interrogate me. His feathers puffed up around him to make himself appear larger.

I was silent, it had been years since I had seen an owl. They were some of the first animals to fall off the radar when the blasts hit. Most were under the assumption that they were now extinct, but apparently there were still one or two left out there. ‘*This one must have cost a fortune*,’ I thought, as I pulled out my copy of *Fluttershy’s Animal and Fowl Catalogue May Supplement* to check. Flipping through to ‘O’ I found Owl and then searched for the breed, Tawny Owl.

“Says here that you go for five times my yearly salary... and not available on the market,” I told the Owl, as if he could actually answer me.

“Whooooo,” the owl hummed at me before jumping up and taking off like a rocket.

I spun around quickly to see where he was going, following my curiosity blindly.

“Why didn’t you tell me we had a guest, Aloysius,” asked a unicorn mare as the owl landed lightly onto her mane.

I was taken aback for moment, giving her a once and then a twice over. She was clearly a rich and pampered sort, not your average Equestrian living from day to day. It was like she glistened with perfection and class. From where I stood I could just barely make out the image of her cutie mark, a crescent moon over a cloud with a single star. Her coat was a powder blue, like the old paintings of an Equestrian sky. She had a mane and tail that looked like they were made of silk; it was so shiny that it was like it was teasing you to touch. The hair was cerulean at the roots and gently drifted into gradient with a darker hue of blue.

Then there were her eyes.

They were like deep pools of gold resting within her almond shaped lids. Her large lashes were accentuated by lavender eyeshadow. They sucked

me with effortless seduction that was assisted by the light curve of her mouth that hinted at a smile.

“Colt Phelps,” her voice rang in my ears like music.

“You know me?” I asked.

She didn’t not answer immediately. “I know of you, but I don’t think I know you.”

“That’s awfully cryptic,” I replied, but she seemed to brush the comment off with a shrug.

“Come this way, we’ve been expecting you,” she said, twirling herself around and walking down the hall from which she came, her steps had a dancer-like grace and were near silent as compared to mine.

“Just who are you anyway?” I finally asked as we walked, trying to resist the temptation of staring at her swaying flank all the way.

“Who I am doesn’t matter. I’m not the pony you’re looking for,” she replied coolly before adding, “Nyx*, that’s my name.”

“And what do you do here exactly? Are you the receptionist?” Nyx let out a small laugh at my question. “Well?”

“I suppose you can call me an assistant of sorts.”

“To who? Blueblood?”

“Oh Celestia, no. Though he has wished as much, given what he requires of his personal assistants,” she gave a small shudder of disgust and added, “I work directly for the Doctor.”

“Clockwork?”

“Yes.”

We had come to a door, which Nyx hesitated to open. She examined me carefully with her golden eyes before finally opening it and leading me

inside. The room was noticeably darker than the rest of the building, it had personality, which led me to believe the main decor was chosen by Blueblood himself. I followed Nyx closely but my eyes began to wander about the room. It felt more like a home than a workplace with mementos neatly placed on the walls and tables. There was a clear sitting area with a few chairs and a love seat. On the table was a neatly stacked pile of the Equestria Times and Fluttershy's Catalogues, January through May. We passed through this main room toward another closed door. From the other side I could hear rapid typing at a keyboard, which stopped just a moment before Nyx knocked.

"Come in," said a muffled voice from inside.

Without another word, Nyx opened the door and motioned me inside, where I came face to face with the doctor. Looking her over, I realized that she was far different in person from what I had expected. She seemed stronger than I would have guessed, not physically but mentally. Though her face retained the look of a youthful pegasus still new to adulthood she must have been closer to my age. Her gray eyes were like clouds before a storm: patient, dark and intimidating.

Over her deep crimson coat she wore a lab jacket with 'Blueblood Industries' embroidered above one of the pockets. On her flank was the image of three gears moving each other, fittingly enough. There was a single stripe of red that ran through her otherwise dark chocolate mane and tail. She was quite the contrast to Nyx, who was quick to trot to her side once we were all inside the room. Where Nyx was soft, Clockwork was sharp. The two of them looked dangerous to me in the guiltiest of ways.

"Clockwork?" I asked, more out of formality than an actual question.

"Phelps," the scientist replied smoothly, "I was told you would be arriving. I wasn't aware it would be so soon."

"I have a job to do; I was told that I would have the details explained upon our meeting... partner."

The pegasus raised a brow before turning her back on me completely and moving to her computer console. Nyx took a step back and shook her head to motion me closer. I obeyed and slowly approached the desk the pegasus

was seated at, watching silently as she clicked away at her console. The owl, Aloysius, decided to take this moment of silence to flop off of Nyx's head to join Clockwork at her chair, clicking his beak happily as he sat beside her keyboard.

"So..." I began.

"Hush," Clockwork cut me off, her eyes did not stray from her screen for even a second.

A few more clicks and she turned the screen to show me. It seemed to be the data banks for a project being conducted by Blueblood Industries, a new restoration project for Equestria from what I could tell. Project Harmony, as it was titled, seem to be based on some old pony tales involving magical elements to restore the land.

"**This** is our assignment." Clockwork stated as I read the page.

"It's a restoration project, what's this got to do with the Blade Trotters?" I asked, drifting away from the page to look at her directly.

"You skimmed, didn't you?" Clockwork's tone was flat and blunt.

"Yes..." I admitted sheepishly.

"Project Harmony is a breakthrough in Reponant technologies." She scrolled down the page and clicked a link that brought up the profiles of six pondroids. There was a pained look on her face as she continued, "It relied on replicating the elements of harmony mentioned in the '*Tales of Six*,' are you familiar with it?"

"Of course," I replied. Those stories could be recited by even the youngest of foals. It told of the six ponies that embodied the Elements of Harmony and saved Equestria from eternal night. It was a staple in Equestrian History, one that ponies clung to these days, maybe because it gave them hope that even in the darkest days light could be found.

"Well then, since I can skip reciting the stories I'll get to the point. Six elements, six missing Reponants... are you seeing where I am going with

this?" Clockwork said with a weary look, as she pointed back to the screen with her hoof.

"Yeah, I follow," I told her with a nod. "But it can't possibly work."

I seemingly struck a chord in the red pegasus, because she glared at me.

"Well Mr. Blade Trotter, I would love to hear how you came to this conclusion," she said, her voice was antagonizing me with a sarcastic sweetness and her eyes still hot with rage.

"Reponants can't possibly contain the elements. They aren't real, they have no emotional capa-" I cut myself short as Clockwork flat out laughed at me, even Nyx looked amused. My temper was soaring but I tried to remain calm. Through gritted teeth I said, "I fail to see the humour."

"Did I not say this was cutting edge in Reponant technologies?" she answered, leaning back in her desk chair and stroking Aloysius' head lazily, "I've worked far too many months on this project to have you spout that Blade Trotter bullshit at me, Phelps."

"You can't teach a machine to love. You program it. It does what it is told, nothing more," I growled. I could already tell this partnership was a bad idea.

"Then why would they run?" she replied, not even looking at me as she spoke now.

I was silent. I didn't know really what to say to this. She took this as a need to prod me for a response.

"Well?"

"Because they've been programmed to -"

"Shut up, Colt," her voice was low and dangerous, as if she meant to say, 'I will kill you.'

"So, why did you run?" I snarled in frustration.

We stared angrily at each other for a few moments, the only sound in the room being the occasional clicking or hum made by the owl. Nyx coughed lightly and shot Clockwork a look to which the red pony sighed.

"This very project, actually," Clockwork finally answered.

"Oh? So are you also the reason these Reponants are on the loose?" I was pushing buttons now, but I felt no remorse for it.

"... Yes. And now I have to help you hunt them. There. Are you happy?" She looked slightly sick at the thought of hunting these machines down.

I couldn't help but think she spent too much time around pondroids and not enough time around real ponies. Still, feeling sympathetic to Reponants was becoming more and more common as they began releasing newer models. With each model acting more and more like the real deal it became a real issue for Blade Trotters. Sympathizers were bound to do something stupid, like help them escape or hide in Equestria. Retiring was not killing but some ponies just didn't understand that.

"At least you won't be the one risking your hide on the field," I told her.

"Just because you have no qualms killing doesn't mean she has to like what she's doing," Nyx suddenly spoke up in annoyance, no longer holding her tongue in Clockwork's presence.

"It's not killing," I corrected her.

"Call it what you like, I don't care," Nyx said with a huff, flipping her hair angrily to one side as she did.

"Your job in this is to try not to '*retire*' these Reponants," Clockwork said, "You think you can handle it? Or will it be too difficult, Phelps?"

"I can handle it."

"Good. Well then, let's show you what you'll be up against." She brought out more detailed profiles of the Reponants I would be hunting with photos. "First on our list is Applejack. Earth pony model Reponant. Built for strength

and endurance. She's one of the two with the most physical strength. Luckily for you, she's grounded."

"What do you mean lucky for me?"

"The other strongest is a Pegasus model," Nyx answered for Clockwork, who gave a nod as she clicked to the next target.

"Right, anyway, second one the list is Fluttershy. She is probably the easiest to take down - she's not aggressive in the slightest. The others will be working to keep her hidden because of this but if you catch her alone she will probably come willingly with next to no trouble."

"Will you give me copies of these profiles?" I asked, to which she silently and resentfully presented me with a folder. Opening it up I was pleased to find my unwilling partner wasn't leaving me completely on my own.

"Anyway, where was I? Ah, yes, Pinkie Pie..." she continued, her face was confusing to read as she looked at the profile. I wasn't sure if she thought this Reponant would be easier or harder than the others.

"What is the problem with this one? Super smart? Very agile?"

"She's... random. I actually don't know how I can prepare you for her," said Clockwork, giving a shrug.

"How bad can she be?" I replied. After all, the pink Reponant seemed just to be a hyperactive Earth pony type.

Both the scientist and her assistant gave me an awkward look. Perhaps I would eat my words later but I was more worried about the magic users.

"I should note that she may have a sixth sense of sort. I am not really sure."

"Not sure? But you created her."

"I was hired to make as perfect a replica of the original pony as I could. I did. I can't even predict or understand her now. Now on to Rainbow Dash - the other heavy hitter of the group."

“Pegasus type.”

“Yup, and less calculated than Applejack... a bit more rash. Fast as lightning to boot. I would say to try to avoid fighting her in clear, open spaces.”

“You’re actually giving me sound advice on these Reponants. I’m surprised.” What she said next surprised me even more.

“I don’t want you dead, Phelps. We’re a team now.” she sighed, clicking to the next profile of our last two targets. “Here are the last two, unicorn models, the both of them. First is Rarity... she was the first instance of imperfections in this project.”

“How so?”

“Her magical abilities were off. She can’t find gems like the original Rarity.”

“I thought you science types could make the unicorn Reponants have exactly the type of magic you want them to have.”

“That is true, for the current models. But these six are from a line that isn’t released to the market. The magic just sort of decided for itself, like it would for ‘organic’ unicorns. It was unexpected to say the least - this was not a problem for Twilight. Well, sort of,” Clockwork answered, rubbing at her temples while she thought.

“Couldn’t you have just... fixed it?”

“I tried, but magic is a stubborn thing. Even with Nyx here to help, it just didn’t work. I had to make near organic life so as to make it possible to recreate the elements. It worked too well. They became their own ponies, only with memories that weren’t theirs. Even other Reponants have their own internally generated cutie marks that are theirs alone - but not them. The whole project was flawed - not to mention cruel.” With a tired look she clicked on the last profile.

“Twilight Sparkle,” I read the name out loud, “You were saying she ‘sort of’ had no trouble?”

“Blueblood wanted them all too be exact copies... only better. Stronger, faster, smarter. After the mistakes made with Rarity I made adjustments that would allow her magic to form the way we needed it to. But thanks to Blueblood wanting everything running at 200% with half the resources... well it got dangerous,” Clockwork explained, her disdain for her employer showing in the way his name fell off her tongue like a bad taste.

“What she means is that Twilight lost control of her powers with more frequency.” Nyx continued, nuzzling her head against the pegasus in a comforting manner.

“We should have left Blueblood as a cactus. He was just as much of a prick, but in that form he couldn’t talk,” Clockwork muttered, to which Nyx let out a small giggle. Hell, even I snickered a bit.

“He would have made a nice table decoration,” Nyx said teasingly as she leaned over the desk and swished her tail from side to side. It took me a moment to realize my eyes were moving from left to right, following the swaying motion of her hips. I could only hope neither of them noticed before I recovered from the momentary daze.

“So, is this it then? Do we have any leads to any of the Reponants?” I said, half trying to steer the topic back before it drifted too far and half trying to keep my eyes off the Unicorn’s flank.

“Not yet. That’s what I’m here for. I’ll be focused on finding leads to the six. You are free to take other jobs to pass the time.”

“And can I trust you to give me the information as you find it?” I asked her suspiciously, to which Clockwork rolled her eyes. “You’ve already let them get away once.”

“You have my word that you will have your leads when you need them,” she muttered.

“When I need them?” My eyes narrowed at this. “How about when you get them?”

“Negative - my job is to be your partner. That means also watching your back. I’ll give you what you need, when you need it. Anything else might be

suicide,” Clockwork dismissed me with a wave of her hoof. “Are you done now, Phelps?”

I gritted my jaw at the response. She was going to be difficult, but what could I do? Doctor Clockwork was going to have all the leads I needed because she was the best suited to find her own machines. The more I connected the pieces the more I realized I would need her working with me more than I would like if I had any hope of finding the Reponants.

“One more thing,” I started, “will the Voight-Clop work on these Reponants?”

“Perhaps.”

“You’ve never tested it?”

“Phelps, how the hell would I have been able to test the only Reponants of their class without letting them know they weren’t actually who they thought they were?” Clockwork said with a hint of snark in her voice.

“I think you’re lying,” I called her out, stamping my hoof on the desk.

“And here we go. Nyx, could you grab me something to drink. Something for Phelps too - he clearly needs it.”

“Certainly,” Nyx replied with a quick nod. I was sad to see her go, but I was starting to see why.

The doctor and I sat in awkward silence for a moment. Neither of us dared to look at one another until I finally decided to speak up.

“She’s one of them. Your assistant is one of the private models, isn’t she?”

“Figure it out yourself, Blade Trotter. Nyx sure as hell doesn’t think she is.”

I didn’t respond with words, instead letting my actions relay the message as I pulled off my bag and began setting up. While I had already used my machine countless times during training this would be the first time I actually got to use it in the field. I couldn’t help but feel a little excited as I placed the metal case on the desktop. With a few smooth clacks, each of

the locks came undone and I pulled the contraption out of its casing. I noticed Clockwork eyeing the test with a curious glance before her expression turned to one more of amusement, as if I were a child with a new toy. I tried to ignore this until I noticed Nyx entering the room, levitating a tray with drinks using her horn's magic.

"Oh! So that's what it looks like?" the unicorn asked innocently as she laid the tray beside me.

"You've never seen a Voight-Clop test before?" I replied.

"Why would I need to?" Nyx replied in a very calm and almost flirtatious tone, "The Voight-Clop is for Reponants, after all."

"I need to calibrate the system. Would you mind letting me perform the test on you?" I was slightly nervous, half hoping I was wrong about my accusation.

"Of course not!" Nyx hadn't even flinched at the question, and even threw me a sweet smile.

"Alright then," I said with a smile of my own, and waved for her to come closer.

Obediently, she seated herself down and I adjusted her as I needed for the test. I positioned the eye piece to align with her right eye and turned the machine on. Other than a quick and intrigued look as the Voight-Clop began reading her, Nyx remained calm and unfazed by the test. Looking to Clockwork, I saw she was also sporting a look of indifference as I readied the questions. I tried not to let this bother me and prepared my questions.

"You've got a little foal. He shows you his butterfly collection - plus the killing jar. What do you do?" I started, I hadn't even finished the last sentence when Nyx's jaw dropped in horror.

"I'd be horrified! I would ask him why he feels the need to kill any creature and immediately question his parents!" she replied with a frown.

"You become pregnant by a colt who runs off with your best friend and you decide to get an abortion."

Nyx shook her head wildly at this, "No, I would never. It's not the foal's fault that I messed up. It would still be mine. Not to mention how hard it is to conceive off the Celestian Colonies."

I started to pick up the pace with my questions, "It's your birthday and somepony gives you a stuffed owl for-"

"What kind of pony would do such a thing?!" Nyx almost shrieked in disgust, suddenly pulling Aloysius into a protective embrace, "I would send them straight to the authorities and have them investigated! **Clearly** something would be wrong with them!"

I continued this for another 30 questions but Nyx responded perfectly. I felt a shower of relief at the last question, downing the last bit of water Nyx had brought me. So what if I had been wrong? At the very least the pretty mare wasn't a fake.

"You passed," I replied, closing up the machine.

"As expected," she answered me with a little laugh. "Here, let me go refill your glass."

"Thank you, Nyx," I said with a smile, passing the cup over, which she lifted with magic and exited the room - a little hop in her trot. She was certainly going to be the plus to my partnership with Clockwork.

Turning to Clockwork, I noticed she was wearing a smug expression. I had expected as much. She was bound to laugh at me for having jumped to such a conclusion. I would let it slide, since I already saw it coming.

"Well, out with it. I know you're dying to laugh at me," I told her as I latched the Voight-Clop shut.

"Oh?" Clockwork said mockingly.

"Yeah, I jumped the gun."

"Nyx **is** a Reponant," Clockwork replied.

I felt my stomach sink. "Are you serious?"

"Very. I have no reason to lie to you about that."

"But she passed - none of her reaction times were-" I started in half disbelief.

"I know. But now you realize you're going to have to do more than depend on that silly machine of yours if you're going to catch these Reponants. Nyx isn't aware that she's a Reponant but these six are, and they'll be looking to trick you, Phelps." Clockwork's tone was serious now and she took a long drink from her otherwise untouched glass. From the way she downed it, I could tell she had not been given water like I had.

"What is wrong with you ponies, always trying to make the pondroids so..." I fought to find the right words.

"Real? That the word you're looking for? What's that shit Blueblood's always spouting? Oh right, 'More pony than pony!' He took that very seriously for this line of Reponants," Clockwork answered, swishing the last bit of liquid around in her glass.

"You started all of this."

"Perhaps," she stated, her eyes staring out into space, "but that is a very narrow view on the situation as a whole, Mister Phelps."

"How so? Are you saying you didn't start all this Reponant business?"

"No, I am very guilty of that. But you have to follow the domino trail. After all, everything is a consequence of a previous action. Reponants were the result of a long war that we lost."

"We *won* the war," I argued.

"You look outside, Phelps. Look at that wasteland out there long and hard and tell me that we 'won' the war."

I opened my mouth to speak, but I found no words.

“Did I interrupt something?” I heard Nyx say quietly as my refilled glass was placed down on to the desk.

“No, Phelps was just getting ready to leave,” Clockwork answered before I could speak, shooting me a very stern look.

“Yes, I should be on my way,” I added, downing my glass quickly. “It’s been a pleasure. I’m sure I’ll be in very close touch in the next few days.”

“Ah, well take care, Colt,” Nyx said with a nod.

“I’ll try,” I replied with a smirk before turning my attention back to scientist, “Clockwork?”

“Hm?” the pegasus raised a brow.

“Don’t leave me hanging too long. I want to get started on this mission as quickly as possible.”

“I’m on it, partner,” she replied, “Goodbye, Phelps.”

“Bye,” I said, sliding my bag back on as I began to leave, before a thought stopped me. Turning back I looked at Aloysius and asked, “Is the owl... authentic?”

“What do you think?” Clockwork replied, petting the bird on the head.

Giving a sigh, I turned around and made my way out. I followed the same path Nyx had used to find my way to the exit. The white walls and tile seemed so much emptier after that meeting. The information on Nyx had left me a little shaken but there was a reason I was given this task. I was the right stallion for the job. Even without a horn or wings, I was the Blade Trotter they chose. The department had their faith put in me and I was not about to let them down.

When I reached the exit, my eyes were forced to squint at the contrast of the darkness outside. Blinking a few times, I left Blueblood Industries behind me as I trotted into the smog filled Manehattan. Fillydelphia hadn’t been much better - perhaps a tad friendlier but that was up for debate. The streets that led me back to my flat were congested with traffic, ponies

pushed and shoved to get where they going. In the darkness, the neon lights for the clubs and bars seemed even brighter. Like moths to a flame, I watched many weary herds enter these buildings for cheap drinks and thrills.

The walk back home seemed longer than the walk from this morning but I endured until I reached the familiar building. While complex wasn't in the finest conditions, it was still better than most. I wiped my hooves before trotting in and making my way to the third floor: door number 18. Opening the door and locking it behind me, I couldn't even pretend to be relaxed. My flat was still in a state of unpacking, half of my belongings still tucked away in boxes that piled in various rooms. Pulling off my work clothes and tossing them on to one of the many boxes I made my way to the living room where I crashed onto my couch, which was still covered in the factory plastic sheet.

I don't remember when I shut my eyes and rested but I knew that I must have as I drowsily opened them hours later at the sound of my phone. With a sleepy groan I rolled off the couch, the plastic sheet sliding off with me as I went to answer the call. Turning on the telescreen, I was surprised to see the red pegasus from earlier staring at me. Nyx was just barely in view as she tried to peek over Clockwork.

"Sleeping?" Clockwork asked, noting my clearly disheveled appearance, "Or were you just *busy*?"

"Neither," I grunted while trying to pat down my mane. I could hear Nyx giggling in the background.

"Good, because I've got your first lead..."

CHAPTER TWO

My first lead?!

I sensed a bit of snark in Clockwork's words but I allowed her that as I fought off any signs of drowsiness. She had my first lead and I was more than willing to forgo sleep in order to prove myself to Maneson when I returned to the office with some progress on the case.

"You've got a lead? Which Reponant is it?" I asked, pulling my uniform back on as I waited on Clockwork for the details.

Perhaps I was a little too eager as I loaded a fresh clip into my old blaster. It had saved my flank too many times to count and I was happy to have a reason to keep it by my side. I was itching to get to some real work, not lie around and do paper work. It wasn't like there was much to see aside from the clubs outside of my flat anyhow.

"I'm sorry, did you think it would be easy?" Clockwork replied, crossing her forelegs as she spoke.

"What's got your saddle upside down?" I snorted, looking toward the telescreen as I adjusted my tie.

"Nothing." she said. Her eyes looked away from her screen as she continued to address me. "Now back to that lead. It's more indirect, but it'll get you closer to finding them. I found some information on a sympathizer that may have helped out runaways."

"Do you have a name?"

"Drifter. He's a Pegasus living downtown, in the eastern market district. According to my sources he's a veteran from the war. From what I have heard, he may be helping to hide at least one of our targets," she answered. My gut told me that she had much more information than that, but was dishing it to me in bite-sized servings. I had no proof, of course, so I kept my mouth shut on the issue.

“A veteran? Why the hell would an ex-soldier want to help out Reponants?”
I couldn’t hide my dissatisfaction to this news.

I always held service ponies with the highest respect - they fought for our freedom after all. This Drifter fellow was like a shadow cast upon that heroic image I so often envisioned. Clockwork clearly noticed it as she made a case for him.

“Maybe he can relate. Fighting for freedom and all that. In any case, he’s the stallion you’ll want to find if we want to get on the hottest trail. You’ll be able to find him most hours at work. He’s a work horse for Blazing Glory Steelworks. If he’s not there, his home is just a block down in building 42, apartment 14. Try to approach him carefully, Phelps, even if he’s alone he can still do a number on you.”

“Should I expect a fight?”

“I would. Drifter has friends, as well as training from the military,” she replied with the answer I had expected.

“Are you one of his friends?”

Silence.

“... I’m emailing you his work and home address now.” Clockwork had ignored my question entirely but I decided not to fight it. I was already running on thin ice, what her eyes still very much cast away from my image on her telescreen.

“Thanks,” I muttered under my breath.

“What was that?” Clockwork replied, suddenly more than willing to stare me down from her screen.

“Nothing. I’ve gotta get going.” I scrambled to gather my things and avoid any more talk on the matter.

“Be careful and good luck, Colt!” Nyx called out to me before I disconnected the call. I felt a smile creeping it’s way on my face and shook

it off. I had to admit, I was liking the Reponant more than my actual partner. But this came to no surprise to me: Nyx was programed to be likable, Clockwork was born stubborn. Maybe that was the charm to pondroids, they really could be anything you wanted them to be with a few keystrokes and flipping some switches.

* * * * *

After the call it was back to the streets for me. Even deep into the night the lower districts were still filled with ponies down on their luck. Zebras and ponies alike haggled over various goods in the markets, the noise of the crowd melted into an almost inaudible drone as I pushed my way through. I made sure to keep my eyes open and alert; anypony that didn't do so was asking to get swindled by a quick grabbing urchin or two.

I felt uneasy as I walked, a tingling sensation running down my spine as I tried to steer around the traffic. Every so often I would stop at an intersection to casually peek around but I saw nothing. Perhaps it was just the paranoia of being surrounded by the anxious tension brought on by the crowd. Something in my gut told me otherwise. Sometimes you just had to go with your instinct.

It wasn't until I got to the industrial district that things began to simmer down to the quiet hum of machinery and distant voices. Being alone was a far different experience and a dangerous one at that. The light clopping of my hooves against pavement seemed to be swallowed up by the thick, smog filled air. Overhead I saw the occasional Police Spinner cruising above the city like giant insects, their flashing lights and ringing siren dissipating into the rhythmic clanking of machinery of downtown.

Reponants were never the only danger a pony faced on the street these days. In a world that was too ruined to see the sun the shadows were sure to expand. The scum of Equestria lurked about in these pockets of darkness, where not even the moon and the stars could shine upon them.

There was a hierarchy to these criminals. It was an unspoken order to the chaos, starting at the bottom with the small-time gangs mostly made up of young colts that were still wet behind the ears to more dangerous sorts willing to spill your insides on to the pavement for a couple of bits. Mixed in with the violence were dealers and crime lords but that was a whole other

story. That was where you started trailing back into civilized crime, where crooks wore suits and talked politics.

Despite the occasional dirty look from a thug or two, I seemed to be in the clear by the time I made it to Drifter's apartment complex. Pushing through the door, I found that the hallway was not much different from the street. The walls were stained and the wall paper had dulled and torn with age. There was a dim, reddish light that illuminated the hall and made the speckled dust in the air glow, adding to the unsettling mood of the place. Climbing my way up the stairs to the third floor, I could hear the muffled sounds of arguing tenants. At least I thought it had been arguing. Closer listening revealed that I had been *completely wrong*. My face was flushed in embarrassment as I picked up my pace, wasting no time to arrive at apartment 14.

I knocked twice and waited for some sort of noise within. I was hesitant to announce myself in the hall, not wanting to have a run in with the sort of 'friends' Clockwork had warned me about. Inside there were some shuffling noises and panicked sounds of somepony about to run.

"Shit!" I growled and quickly bucked the door down just in time to see a tail slip out the fire escape. "FREEZE!"

Charging toward the window, I tried my best to trail Drifter. He hadn't gotten too far ahead, but the stairs made it difficult for me to get too close before he took off like a rocket on leveled ground. I leaped over the last ten steps but even that was not enough to gain in on him. I had to hand it to the old stallion, he was certainly giving me quite the run.

"Drifter! I just need to ask you a few questions!" I called out to the shadowed stallion running ahead. He didn't even flinch, instead taking a sharp left toward one of the mill yards for Blazing Glory Steelworks. More determined than ever, I galloped toward the metal yard right after him.

"Shit!" I exclaimed as I saw Drifter head towards a warehouse, kicking the door closed behind him. I gritted my teeth as my hooves slid in a failed attempt to avoid the inevitable slam into the door.

"Oof! I'm gonna feel that tomorrow," I groaned, pulling myself off the door and slamming back into it in an attempt to unhinge it. After a few more

painful hits I found myself inside the forge of the steel factory. Drifter was nowhere in sight.

Cranks and gears were moving, still doing automated work while the employees were away. I could barely breathe in the humidity from the various fire pits. I only took a few steps inside before I couldn't take having my jacket on.

"Hello?! Drifter?!" I called out over the roaring flames and machinery, "I need your help!"

No response. I had to expect as much. I trotted carefully as hot steel poured into various containers around me. Loosening my tie, I continued the pursuit, desperately looking for the pegasus. I glanced up, searching the rafters for any sign of the damn stallion but turned up with nothing. Nothing at all. In fact, I had yet to see him use flight once in my pursuit...

I shook off the thought as the sound of metal crashing echoed through the warehouse. I chased after it as fast as my hooves could take me before another crash behind me left me confused. Slowly I turned in a circle, looking down every path. How did he get there so fast without me seeing him?

"Drif-" I broke off as I heard an unsettling creaking from above. Looking up I noticed levitation magic tipping one of the melting pots away from its base and dangerously close to me.

"By Celestia!" I yelled as I twisted myself around and started to run as the pot came tumbling down. Liquid metal, still red hot, came pouring out with a hiss as it streamed over the cement floor.

'That could not have been Drifter', I realized as I ran toward a ramp and on to a metal catwalk hanging from the ceiling.

The metal platform swayed uncomfortably from its wires as I looked down at the molten steel below. I raced in an opposite direction to put some distance between myself and the spill, all the while looking for the other pony hidden in here with me.

FWIP-SHING!

There was a high pitched sound as I turned to find the wires on the catwalk snapping behind me, causing the whole platform to buckle and lean to one side. My tail was now an inch or two shorter, which I considered a stroke of luck. It could have very well been a leg or neck that was sliced through with ease.

“Hey coward! Is magic the only way you know how to fight?!” I belted over the loud hum of the warehouse, “At least try to face me in a fair fight!”

Normally, egging the fight on was never a smart idea, but in this case I had no choice. With magic, you had to lure your opponent out. Some ponies were trickier than others but in more cases it was just a matter of calling said unicorn out on being weak without their magic. It was a low blow, I’ll admit, but when you needed to get something done you have to do what you have to do.

“What did you call me?!” a deep voice roared back.

Turning, I saw the familiar shape of the stallion I had been chasing further down the catwalk. In the fire’s dim, orange light I could see his figure a little better, though not by much. His mane and coat were a dark blue. I could now make out the shape of his horn in the hazy wall of humidity that separated us. He had piercing blue eyes. They glowed dimly like stars in a midnight sky, like they did with many of the earlier Reponant models.

“You heard me, coward. But I suppose that was a misjudgement on my part, since you’re only a Reponant,” I replied, watching closely for any sudden attacks he might make. I sauntered toward him, his eyes staring me down with a cautious glare.

“That’s close enough, Blade Trotter,” he snarled suddenly, keeping me a few meters away from him.

“How do you know I’m a Blade Trotter?” I asked coolly.

“I’ve got friends in high places. I know your face... even your name, Mister Phelps,” he answered me with a smug expression.

‘Clockwork sold me out, didn’t she,’ I thought immediately. I was furious but I tried to remain calm.

"Troubled, Officer?" The Reponant sneered.

"That's *Detective*. And why should I be? What good is that knowledge to you?"

The Reponant gave a look of displeasure at my words, perhaps because aside from recognizing me in a crowd he had no other means of using the information against me. I took a step forward, to which he lowered his head and pointed his horn at me.

"I said that was *close* enough, Phelps," he hissed from behind bared teeth.

"Now this isn't fair, I don't even know your name." I replied, adding a hint of amusement to my voice.

"Viper," he growled.

"Was that the name your owners gave you?"

"I named myself!"

"Oh... wow, then you really have no excuse. That's just an awful name," I laughed.

"Shut up!"

"Oooh, giving orders now? Sorry, I don't take orders from scrap metal." I was walking closer the more I got him talking, as it seemed to distract him.

From this distance I could see him much clearer than before. He was rattier than his silhouetted figure had let on. His coat was greasy and matted, making me wonder if it was only a dark blue because of a lack of hygiene. He had the look of something that would taint you at the very touch, making me less than welcoming of close combat. This was not to say I was an overly vain stallion - as even the least sensible ponies would never want to touch a steaming pile of shit if given a choice.

“I might be scrap metal to you, but you’re a hell of a lot more fragile to me, “ Viper spat the words, leaving trail of drool dripped sickeningly from his mouth, which he licked back up. I could feel my stomach turn in disgust.

“We’ll see about that,” I replied, keeping a close eye on Viper as he swayed from side to side.

The platform swayed with Viper in a jagged motion. I immediately lost any faith I had in its stability at that moment. I didn’t dare to look below, lest he come charging, but I could feel the heat from the forge under me. Viper scraped at the metal floor with his hooves with anxious anticipation. Lowering his head, he brandished his horn at me with dangerous intent.

I tried to ready my blaster in it’s hoof holster, to which Viper shook his head no.

“Tsk, tsk. Not really fighting fair are we? ” the unicorn said, his horn glowing now.

I barely even got a chance to open my mouth before I heard the metal wires behind me snap, row by row. The metal platform groaned as the weight and balance shifted behind me.

“Time to run, Blade Trotter!” There was a poisoned delight in Vipers voice, his mouth curling into a frightening grin.

Rearing up, I twisted my body, feeling my muscles strain painfully as I took off on to the now broken portion of the catwalk - Viper in tow. I broke into a gallop but for every bit of distance I gained, two more wires ahead would snap and whip dangerously. The platform was no longer stable, as it rocked from side to side like a pendulum. It swung slowly but enough to make me uncomfortable about a large boiling containers below.

I could no longer hear the heavy clops of Viper’s hooves chasing me. Had he stopped altogether? Looking behind me I saw nothing, not even the dark outline of the unicorn. I took another step, slowly now. I kept looking back but saw nothing but the empty platform behind me. I took this as chance to ready my gun, locking it to the bracer I wore on my hoof for shooting. My eyes were darting in every direction, hunting for any sign of the Reponant to no avail.

"Where the hell is he?" I muttered to myself, looking down for any odd shadows lurking about the factor floor. A sudden cackle of laughter forced me to look up.

Above me was a large, steel construction beam with Viper standing proudly atop it. His horn glowed vibrantly with the magic that kept the large mass afloat. He looked down at me as if he had some sort of authority over me, his chest puffed out and his mouth locked into a slimy grin. Leaping off with an unpony-like ability Viper landed ahead of me, blocking my only escape route as the beam came crashing down on the platform. The sound of grinding metal screeched in my ear, leaving behind a terrible ringing noise. My hooves lost their footing and I struggled for a moment as my hind legs fell, causing me to slide backwards.

"Wh-whoaa!" I yelped in surprise as I latched onto the broken railing with my forelegs.

Just above the sloping decline where I dangled I could see Viper grinning at me with glowing eyes. I tried pulling myself up, but the thin metal bars cracked with a sound that made my heart sink. I didn't dare to look down, the heat rising below me was already enough to worry me as my broken support rail continued to crack slowly under my weight. Viper seemed entertained by my struggles as he remained motionless.

"Need a lift?" he mocked me, cocking his head to one side to get a better view of my situation. I remained silent, glaring intensely at him as I pulled once more.

SNAP!

My eyes went wide as the railing snapped off the catwalk. Desperately my forelegs gripped on the metal bars as my hind quarters swung helplessly in the air. I bit down on the rail for extra support as it rocked and swayed of its own accord.

"Ahahahahaha! Now this is entertainment!" Viper yelled in delight, rearing up as he laughed at my expense.

Looking down I noticed conveyor belt feeding scrap into another machine further in the factory. It was a long shot of a jump, one that would cost me if I missed. Still, with the railing collapsing a little bit at a time, I had few options left. Swinging my haunches, I hoped to break the gap before finally leaping.

“Hey! Hey what are you up to?!” I could hear Viper hissing from the platform as I swung once more. “Stop that!”

Not wasting my chance I released myself from the railing bar and went flying off toward the moving belt. Gritting my teeth, I braced for the landing - which was a messy one. My legs buckled, causing me to roll over the sharp scrap pieces along it. I could no longer tell if it was my sweat or blood that was falling in tiny beads down my coat, perhaps a combination. I looked up in time to see Viper running along the still intact platform above. Taking aim, I shot at him from my position. Small sparks flew as the bullets ricocheted off the bars.

“Damn it!” I cursed, as I watched him move out of my range and towards a control panel of sorts. I stared in curious anticipation as Viper pressed a trigger. The belt jerked to a stop and I almost managed a sigh of relief before the conveyor belt started to move faster, charging towards the incinerator. Without much hesitation, I managed to roll to the ground level with a painful thump.

“Ugh...” I groaned as I pushed myself back up on to my hooves, shaking off stray bits of dirt and metal from my shirt. My legs killed after the two falls but I had to keep moving.

“Getting tired, Mundy?” I heard Viper call out from above.

Mundy... I hated that term. It was slang some elitist unicorns or pegasi called Earth ponies. The word was short for mundane and it never sat well with me.

“At least I’m *real*,” I spat.

“That all you can think up? What does it really matter to you? I think, therefore I am. Isn’t that how the saying goes, Mister Phelps?” he said

smoothly as he made his way off the platform, jumping from to one landing to the other until he was level with me.

“Get over yourself. Anything you think was already programmed by somepony else. You’re not real. You’re a machine, nothing more. I have a coffee maker about as useful as you. You’re nothing but a tin soldier. A toy!” I laughed, stumbling forward.

“You shut up,” he growled, stamping his hooves on the concrete floor.

“Why? After all, you called me a *mundy*, so pointing out your short comings is fair game. I might not be able to shoot magic from a horn, but damn I live. I **live**. But not you, you’re just a puppet. Honestly, I feel for you. I feel for you because I can feel, but what you think you feel... it’s all fake. All of it. It’s a cruel lie, Viper, and that’s what we Blade Trotters are here for. To help. I can make the lie stop.”

“YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH!” Viper screamed, charging horn first at me.

I tried to roll out of the way but with my injured leg it didn’t take much for the Reponant to have me pinned to the cool cement floor. His hooves landed ruthlessly into my ribs, causing me to cough and gasp for air. I kicked back, striking him in the gut with my hind legs. Buckling slightly I moved on to my back and aimed my blaster, shooting several rounds in his direction. Blinded by pain, I kept shooting long after Viper fell onto his side. He was still breathing by the time I got back on my hooves, laying in a puddle of his own pseudo blood. He stared at me from the corner of his eyes as he struggled to breathe. I couldn’t help but notice his cutie mark, a mine cart with brightly colored gems inside. I made note of this for my report.

“I... lived,” I heard him cough before his eyes lost their glow.

Gently, I closed his glazed eyes with my hoof before limping my way out of the factory. Grabbing my coat near the entrance I began making my trip back towards Drifter’s flat. One step at a time. And then everything went black.

* * * * *

'What happened,' was the first and logical question I asked myself as my eyes opened to find I was in a familiar, dank room. The window I had chased Viper through was still open, letting a cool breeze chill the room.

"Well, well. Look who's finally awake," came a deep voice from behind me.

I craned my neck to see a large, light grey pegasus staring back at me from the small nook that could just barely be called a kitchen. A few scars marred his face and body, adding to his already intimidating appearance. One such scar trailed down his hind left leg, which was noticeably missing. Well to be fair, it was there, in the form of a heavy looking prosthetic. His mane was a mixture of dusk gray and old age silver. He studied me with narrowed, teal green eyes - as if to see how best to kill me if he needed to. I could see from his stance he was a military stallion. Even now, in this *slum*, he held the regal authority of one of Celestia's finest.

"Are you Drifter?" I croaked from the couch I appeared to be laying on.

"Who's asking?" The pegasus replied with a careless shrug.

"You know damn well who's asking."

"Don't get your tail in a twist, foal," he snorted before adding, "What did you want? Answers, I suppose?"

"How do you figure? I could be here to arrest you."

"Yeah, yeah you could. But you're not. Anyways, ask what you need to and get the hell out of here," Drifter replied gruffly as he took a seat beside me.

I was stunned into silence for a moment as Drifter calmly poured himself a drink. Blinking twice I finally said, "I heard you have information on a few Reponants."

"Which ones? Let's be honest here, we both know I have a lot of contacts."

Looking around the room, I searched for my saddle pack, which was no longer on me. Along with my blaster, which turned my look of exhaustion into one of annoyance. There were few material things that mattered to me and my blaster was one of them. My gun was more than just a weapon, it

was an extension of myself. It's a feeling that is hard to explain without it coming off more violent than it truly is. Exchange the blaster for an instrument and I think the relationship becomes a bit clearer. A violin never played without somepony to pull the bow. You see, for me, my gun had always been with me. Any time it injured, killed or retired I knew about it. My blaster never acted without me, not once, and that's how I liked it.

"All your gear is over in the corner if that's what you're looking for," Drifter muttered over his glass of whiskey, lazily pointing with one hoof to a neatly kept pile of my things.

My body was still stiff from my encounter with Viper. A series of pops could be heard from nearly all of my joints as I made my way off the couch and on to my hooves. Just as I reached my saddlebag with my teeth a loud cough brought my attention back to Drifter.

"You wouldn't happen to be looking for these?" Drifter asked slyly as he placed my files on the six Reponants on the table between us, "I thought I would save you the trouble of bringing the bag all the way back here."

'You smarmy bastard,' I thought to myself while gritting my teeth.

"You went through my things," I stated, making no effort to hide my discontent.

"You went through **my** house," he retorted with little remorse for his actions, leafing through the pages of each file.

"Do you always act this way to the law?"

"You always act like your shit don't stink, Detective?"

"Drifter!" Came another voice with a heavy accent from a previously closed room.

Mine and Drifter's eyes immediately shot to the other end of the small apartment where a zebra mare stood in a doorway to what seemed to be a bedroom. She was on the younger side of adulthood, in pony years I would guess she was in her early to mid twenties. Her coat was a silvery white, save for the deep red that made up her strips. She seemed to have an

inverse pattern in her tail, which were primarily red with a few streaks of white.

Looking back to Drifter I couldn't help but noticed that the gruff and tough pegasus now wore a look of sheepish shame.

"Zaphira, I'm dealing with bus-" Drifter only just managed to get in before the Zebra cut him off.

"Oh, I see, and that gives you the excuse to act like this to guests?" Zaphira snapped, giving Drifter a harsh look.

"He's not a-" Drifter started, snapping his mouth shut as she glared at him with her violet eyes.

"Don't make excuses. He's in our home, he's a guest."

Their home? I couldn't help but dart my eyes between the two. She was so much... younger. I felt a twinge of jealous admiration for the old stallion.

"Yes, Sir!" Drifter declared with a mock salute to the mare.

"You know I hate that," Zaphira's words were flat, but a quick smile made its way across her face and she rolled her eyes.

There was a silent look between the two, which made me feel terribly uncomfortable. Coughing, I hoped to garner the attention of at least one of them. At this Drifter looked to her, then to the folder and back again. With a silent understanding she gave a sigh and looked to me.

"I apologize for his behaviour. Bit rough around the edges," Zaphira said kindly. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"No ma'am I'm fine, thanks." I replied with a polite nod.

"Ma'am?" Zaphira laughed, "I'm not as old as *he* is, you know."

"A-hem, so what were you saying before?" Drifter spoke up suddenly, dragging my attention back to the files that lay between us.

“Well do you know any more than what you’ve already found from snooping?” I asked, cutting right to the point.

“Are you the Trotter assigned to Clockwork?”

“She was assigned to me,” I corrected him.

“Whatever the case, if you’re working with her then I suppose I can let you in on a few details,” Drifter replied with a shrug as he refilled his glass, only to give an affronted look as Zaphira snatched the glass right from under his hoof. “Blasted thief...” he grumbled.

“You drink too much,” She chided, promptly downing the liquor herself.

Drifter snorted in mock annoyance before pulling up one of the files, “This one.”

Leaning over I saw he’d pulled out Applejack’s record from the stack. “Where is she?”

“Hell if I know now. She left about three days ago, after she got into a disagreement with my other guest.”

“Viper?” I figured I might as well see if he had any more guests hiding away.

A look of disappointment crossed his eyes, causing him to hesitate before finally saying, “Yeah, him. He had his demons and it made him do some stupid shit. His methods of escape didn’t suit AJ and she left.”

“You just let her leave? Just like that?” Inwardly I was praying that he had some idea as to where the pondroid was going. I didn’t want this to lead to more dead ends.

“I didn’t just let her leave, I tried to talk her out of it. Kinda glad she did now, given the circumstances. Wouldn’t have wanted Viper getting her hurt on account of you.”

“... Do you have any idea where she could have gone?” I asked, my brow furrowed in anxiousness.

Drifter gave a serious look, tapping his hoof on the table as he actually considered my question. I began to wonder just how much contact he had with Clockwork prior to my arrival... or while I was unconscious on his couch.

"If I were in her horseshoes I suppose I'd aim for the most logical place to go if I were feeling lost," Zaphira cut in, her accent adding a naturally wise tone to her words, "Home."

"Sooo... back to Blue Blood Industries?" I asked the question with a hint of uncertainty and confusion. It didn't exactly make sense, especially if Drifter said the Reponant had left three days ago. That would have left her at the company, safe and sound before I had even gotten the mission.

"You moron. Not Blueblood Industries. The old apple farm back in Ponyville!" Drifter retorted in a matter-of-fact manner. "Why the devil would she ever consider bringing herself in?"

"While my, erm, Drifter lacks the tact I would have used... yes, Ponyville seems to be the most logical destination," Zaphira added.

"Ponyville?! That dump?" I expressed my surprise before thinking back on the tale of six, "Besides... isn't that too obvious? Wouldn't she avoid it to stay out of the line of Blade Trotters?"

"Maybe she figures she can find a relative or friend more easily in Ponyville. It's not completely absurd to think in such a way when you're on the run," Drifter replied.

"I see..." I said, looking down at the file once again, "Did she change her appearance much from what is shown in the file?"

"Not while she was here. But after the instance with the other Blade Trotter-" Drifter began.

"What other Blade Trotter?" I cut in, my eyes narrowed cautiously at him.

"It was Viper's doing. Drifter and I were out at the time," Zafira spoke in a firm and truthful tone, to which Drifter added a silent nod.

“Another Blade Trotter tried to turn them in. There was a struggle and Viper didn’t hold anything back. I wouldn’t have known it happened had AJ not told me the whole story when I got back. Apparently she didn’t take well to the situation, and given how Viper killed the poor sonuvabitch I could understand why she’d be shaken.” Drifter’s explanation seemed genuine, a lingering guilt making its way out in his words.

“Did you even bother to report it?”

“If by report you mean screw myself over, then I think we both know the answer. His body was found and reported by somepony else.” By the sound of his voice, I could now see the guilt he was showing was not for the dead Cop but the runaway Reponant.

“But you let Viper continue hiding here?” I said with an accusatory flare in my voice.

“Actually, no. I told him to find his own way out after AJ left. The fact that he was here to greet you at all has me... upset,” Drifter answered me with a dark tone, as if he resented not being the one to stomp Viper’s head in himself, “I don’t take kindly to intruders.”

“You keep calling the pondroid AJ, is that what she’s going by?”

“It’s a nickname. But I’m sure that if she heard it being called out by a stranger she’d know better than to stick around.” Zaphira replied this time.

“Fair point,” I noted, packing away my files.

“You heading out?” Drifter asked, watching as I began pulling my coat and bag on.

“Yeah, I have all I need for now. And from what you’re saying, Applejack is already three days ahead of me,” I explained.

Drifter gave a torn look before saying, “Do me a favor and get yourself some rest. I’m no doctor, but I did what I could to help with some of your bleeding. I’d hate for AJ to feel guilty for killing you if you picked a fight in that state.”

"Thanks." I said, a little more angrily than I had meant to.

"Don't mind him. Drifter has always had a strange way of showing he cares," Zaphira told me, "You're a stallion of the law and so is he. You may support different causes... but it does count for something. Otherwise, he would have just let you bleed to death out there."

In response, Drifter made a barely audible and noticeably reluctant sound of agreement. I nodded silently to Zaphira, avoiding any direct eye contact with her. I wasn't exactly sure what the relationship was. I could tell it was an intimate one, that much was obvious to anyone. After that the line became hazy. I couldn't be sure the two were actually married. Zebra and pony relationships were rare outside of the clubs and while there was nothing against it I'd never even heard of a marriage between the two.

In any case, asking was a job for a stallion much ruder than myself. Zaphira seemed to be standing up for me in her own way and I wasn't about to ruin that in the event that I would need another lead. Life was uncertain and I couldn't afford to burn bridges yet crossed.

"I'll probably be back, there is more that I need to question you about after I file a report on the incident with Viper," I said stiffly, trying to segue to my exit.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say, Officer," Drifter snorted, waving me off with his hoof.

"You think this is all a game? You're housing illegal property," I responded in a heavy tone.

"And that's why I didn't go into law enforcement," the pegasus stated casually.

Blinking twice I replied, "What?"

"You're one cold S.O.B. - that's what. Do you ever stop to think about how or what you're saying? No, you you're the clean cut model of the perfect officer. You do as you're told without second guessing the orders. I've saved countless lives by going against that very grain."

"I protect ponies everyday and I do so by the badge. You are only protecting robots, robots that have killed *real* ponies with families that will mourn them. I know you're a cyborg, but there is a clear difference between-"

"Get out," Zaphira suddenly interrupted, her eyes staring intensely at me. It was strange. Her eyes didn't hold so much a look of anger or resentment but of pity. It bothered me.

"Mmm, I think it's time we parted ways, Mister Phelps. You've got reports to fill out, am I right?" Drifter said, choosing his words carefully as he lay a hoof lightly on Zaphira's shoulder.

"I didn't mean to-" I started but Drifter lifted a hoof to tell me to stop.

"If I thought you meant to insult me I would have broken that little 'poster colt' face of yours, that is, if Zaphira didn't beat me to it. Now you run back home, Blade Trotter, and when you get a chance say hi to that partner of yours for me," he said with a small smirk.

Nodding, I silently wondered how many "friends" Clockwork had tucked away from me until she deemed it necessary to ask for their help. Perhaps, if I was clever enough, I could hack into her computer if I had the chance... but no. I was sure the red pegasus had placed measures against even the most savvy of hackers, let alone a nosy detective trying to get some extra clues as to what she was hiding. For the time being I was just going to have to deal with being one step behind her... for now.

Limping myself out of Drifter's home, I couldn't help but feel as though my information gathering had only been a partial victory. I got my information and successfully retired a rogue Reponant but I felt dirty leaving Drifter to continue working outside of the law. For now, I would just have to consider it a favor in exchange for his aid.

Only a little further down my path I could see the the murky, grey sky illuminated by the lights of several Police cruisers. Ignoring the pain in my hind legs, I tried to pick up my pace toward the flashing colored lights. Soon enough a symphony of sirens whined their way into my ears, timed perfectly with the beat of the lights in an unintentional harmony.

Smoking against a chain linked fence were a few stallions dressed in police attire, their hats laid lazily upon their manes as a coroner pulled up to the scene. Flashing my badge, the officers gave me a friendly nod as I made my way past them to the very place I had been fighting Viper hours ago.

Stepping past my new colleagues, it didn't take long before I found Maneson chewing a cigar and shouting over the machines as photos were taken of the shell that was Viper. I fought against my limp, walking as triumphantly as I could towards my superior. Noticing me, Maneson adjusted his cigar shooting me a toothy grin.

"This your work, Phelps?" Maneson asked in his gruff voice, ashing off his cigar as he spoke.

"Mmhmm, yes, sir." I gave a short nod, anything more and I'd be kissing ass.

"I figured as much... Your partner gave me a ring, saying you hadn't called in for some time. She sounded worried, for once," he replied, sounding slightly amused.

My ears perked in surprise.

"Worried? Hmph, for a while I was beginning to worry that she'd lost the ability to feel for anything that's not synthetic," I snorted, Maneson chimed in with a roar of laughter.

"Ahahaha! You're a good one Phelps, you're a good one. First day on the job and you're already pulling your own weight around here. I like that in a Blade Trotter. Seems I got the right stallion for this job," he laughed through clenched teeth, keeping his cigar firmly in place. Maneson delivered a few hard blows to my back, a friendly gesture but a little too much for my weary form to take without a few twitching cringes.

"Thanks... sir," I coughed, bearing my teeth in a forced smile.

"Now then, I expect the report on this retired hunk of junk on my desk in the next few days. As well as any progress you've made with your top case. As I expected, that blasted mare wasn't giving me more than a hint to where

you might be lying in a puddle of blood before shutting off communications,” Maneson spat, clopping his front hooves defiantly. “Now get outta here, we’ll take care of this mess. Ya did good, Colt, ya did good.”

With a grateful nod I carried myself back home, being too proud to ask for a ride back in one of the spinners. Worn, but not beaten, I was relieved to find myself undressed and situated into bed. Try as I might, I found myself awake in the dark. I stared up at the silhouettes the windows cast on my ceiling. Dim neon lights cast a reddish hue into the room that reflected dancing shadows across my eyes.

I thought about my next task at hoof, and the inevitable meeting I would have with my partner. I didn’t like the thought of what was to come. Strangely enough, I was more worried about Nyx’s actions than of Clockwork’s. The yelling I could handle, but quiet looks of disappointment from anypony, let alone a machine... now *that* bothered me.

With a loud huff, I closed my eyes tightly and wished for dreams to steal me away.