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READY.

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Chapter One

Ash and Dust

I suppose if I have to start somewhere, it would be with the day I was reborn.



The first thing I knew was hunger.

Not the kind of hunger that sends you to the pantry to find a quick snack. Not even the kind of hunger that slowly wears you down as you starve to death. I mean the kind of hunger that tears at your very soul, consuming your every thought.

My world was hunger; everything else was a mere flicker of light in the background.

Then my hunger-deranged mind caught the one thing out there that mattered to it: love. It latched onto the intoxicating sensation, pushing me toward a single, simple objective:

Feed!

I surged forward. In the distance, past the hunger, I could feel a body—my body!—move in response. It felt so remote, so detached from the hunger and sweet sense of love that had become my entire world.

I pushed forward, and something resisted me. Numbly, instinctively, I lowered my head and pushed again. I was only vaguely aware of the cool sensation that met my horn as I drew a little closer to my prize. Clumsy limbs pushed and flailed as the sensation spread, and I flowed forward. I felt pin-pricks all along my body as everything twisted and turned with my movement, the world momentarily losing all sense of cohesion, then solidifying abruptly as I struck something hard. Past the laser-like focus of my hunger-addled mind, I only barely recognized that it was the ground.

Thick fluid coursed over my body as I reoriented on the love I sensed. My hooves wobbled and slid against the hard ground as I coughed up copious amounts of fluid, but I ignored the difficul-

ties of my body. I scrambled blindly forward, over inconsequential obstacles, until I fell upon the source of the tantalizing emotion.

I didn't know exactly what I grasped in my hooves. It was small, hard, and most importantly, filled with love.

I fed.

I drew in every little bit of love, and the terrible hunger relaxed its grip on my mind.

Devoid of the powerful, all-consuming drive, my head sunk to the wet ground, feeling so incredibly heavy. Then everything was gone once again.



To this day, I still can't remember the dream that had followed. The only thing I remember was the voice that had been at the center of my world. My Queen. Queen Ephema.

I don't remember what she said in my dream. I just remember that she was there, speaking, and that her voice was happy and kind. I wish I could remember more.

I like to think that the dream was of the day I had left the hive for my first solo assignment. The day I had truly stepped up to embrace the mantle of Infiltrator. The day that I could finally return all the effort she and the rest of the hive had invested in me. Queen Ephema had spoken to me many times before, as she did with all of her children, but that day was special. That day, she told me how proud she was of me; how happy she was for me.

I felt as light as a feather at her kind words, a happiness that I clung to during my long months away from the hive.

I don't know for sure if that's what I dreamed of, but I like to think it was.

It's how I want to remember her.



Sound was the first sense to creep its way into my reluctantly conscious mind. I slowly became aware of a quiet, repetitive squeaking nearby. Somewhere in the distance, a klaxon sounded, muffled and echoing,

mixed with indistinct words from some far-away speaker. As consciousness returned, I began to notice the soft hum of electronics all around me, and the steady dripping of liquid.

A faint glow caught my attention. A ghostly flicker of orange barely seen through my eyelids, just on the edge of my perception. After a few moments of drowsy contemplation, I finally opened my eyes. A wavering orange splash of light weaved back-and-forth around a blob of green light. It took several slow blinks before my vision started to focus. The wavering orange light was cast by an emergency light. It squeaked as it spun in place, casting its rotating light across a bare concrete wall and filling the dark room with deep, flickering shadows. The green I saw was the light shining through the deflated remains of the chrysalis I had just escaped.

Now, I want to clarify for any who might be confused: that's *lower*-case chrysalis, a changeling cocoon, not *upper*-case Chrysalis, the changeling queen. I figure it's probably clear from context, but I wouldn't want anyone to think I came from *her*.

After contemplating the limp, dripping remains of the chrysalis, I raised my head. Thick fluids dribbled from my chin as I took in more of the room. The first detail I caught stopped me cold. On either side of the cocoon I had emerged from hung many more. The first one I looked at was still full, though the fluid was dark and murky. The spinning light cast shadows across the empty husk of a dead changeling floating within it.

A faint flicker of adrenaline, cold and acidic, began to chase away the remaining sleepiness.

The husk sat still, suspended in the dark muck of its own decay. Vacant eyes stared out, the empty carapace tangled up in wires that attached to it in several places. I stared numbly at it for several seconds before I swallowed—despite the fluids still slowly dripping from me, my mouth felt dry—and looked back to the chrysalis I had escaped. Similar wires hung from the gash my horn had torn in the clear membrane, the pads that had attached them to my body dangling.

I looked slowly over the line of cocoons, ten in total. Only one other was still full, and its occupant had fared no better. The rest

were torn and deflated, dangling in tattered ribbons from the pipes above. A couple more husks hung in mid-air, entangled in the remains of the chrysalises that had held them. Others had fallen to the ground. Some, I realized in horror, had survived their internment only to die shortly after gaining their freedom. One of the obstacles I had blindly stumbled past was the dead husk of another changeling, sprawled out on the floor as if it had been trying to reach the same life-giving store of love I had just devoured. The empty eyes of the exoskeleton stared in my direction, as if blaming me for her death.

I lay my head down, eyes shutting again. My heart rate and breathing had accelerated, and I focused on breathing slowly and deeply. I had to focus and stay calm. I had a responsibility. My hive had invested years of training, preparing me to deal with stressful and dangerous situations. I hadn't anticipated ever finding myself in such a horrible situation, but I knew I couldn't let that stop me. I owed all of them that much and more.

Especially the ones who lay dead, where I had lived.

So I wrestled down the feeling of fear and despair that clawed at the back of my mind. I slowly relaxed, stilling the trembling that sought to take over my body. I lay there in the room as I focused on the quiet, repetitive noises all around me.

I'm not sure how long I simply lay there in that shallow puddle of fluids. I knew I couldn't stay there forever, that I had to eventually get up and deal with whatever had happened. That was slightly complicated by having no idea what *had* happened. My mind was still slow and groggy from the induced hibernation within the chrysalis, and my memory was spotty at best. I needed to get up, figure out what had happened, and find my way from there.

But still, I just lay there, ignoring the world around me, as if by refusing to acknowledge it, it might cease to exist. I ignored the empty husks of my dead siblings. I ignored the uncomfortable object beneath my chest, which I had collapsed atop after my meager feast. I ignored the form that lay beside me, glimpsed in the corner of my eye; a large form, still and silent, looming over me.

I didn't want to look. I wanted to lay there, as if I could pretend

there was nothing wrong. It was tempting, but I knew I couldn't. I owed it to my hive, my Queen. I had to look.

I had to face the truth, no matter how it hurt.

So I opened my eyes again, shakily raising my head, and turned to look at the empty husk of Queen Ephema. Even in death, she still looked regal, laid out with her head leaning against the concrete wall.

I trembled, giving a weak sob around the tightness in my throat. I might have even cried a little. Part of me wanted to just give up; to curl up beside her, close my eyes, and join her. My Queen was dead. My hive, likely, as well. Why else would she still be lying here, uncared for? It was a disgrace, a defilement. Noling would have permitted this, had they been able to do anything about it.

Another dead changeling lay beside her, a foreleg draped across one of the Queen's. The gaping eyes showed me—in more detail than I could have ever hoped or wanted—the emptiness that lay within the exoskeleton. Everything that had made them who they were had decayed away long before I had woken, leaving nothing but empty husks behind.

I looked to the other changeling lying beside the Queen, and wondered if she had given up, preferring death at her Queen's side over carrying on with such a horrible burden. I quickly cast the thought aside. Whoever she had been, she deserved better than such dark thoughts.

A sudden fit of coughing wracked my body, wet and phlegmy. I managed to cough up another mouthful of liquid, spitting it to the floor.

Recovering from the coughing fit, I suddenly realized the lump under my chest was the Queen's other foreleg. Ignoring the weakness in my limbs, I quickly scrambled to my hooves. It wasn't out of disgust or fear from contacting a... a corpse. It simply seemed disrespectful to treat her remains as if they were a common cushion.

As I stood, a flicker of light and a quiet clatter drew my attention down to the concrete floor by my hooves. A crystal the size of one of my fangs lay there, reflecting the spinning light. I knew immediately what it was; a love crystal, a wonderful little device for storing, as you might guess, love. A small one like it could hold enough love to keep

a changeling fed for weeks, but this one lay empty. I had consumed what little love was left in it.

Several more lay encircled by my Queen's forelegs, as if she were protecting them. All were empty, without even the faintest trace of love remaining. Had they been consumed? Or had their love leaked away, like a spoiling apple? How long could those crystals hold love?

I saw it as an offering; one final gift to her children. I didn't doubt it for a second. She lay there as if she knew what was coming, and still she sought to provide for us. I shuddered, eyes tearing up again. Her gift was the only reason I was alive.

Even with that gift, my hunger still had its claws sunk in deep. I needed to find a source of love soon, or her gift would be wasted. A few days, maybe. Even refraining from the use of magic, I wouldn't last a week.

Only then did I notice the object held between her hooves. I stared at it through blurry eyes for several seconds before I realized what it was.

A data-store. Small, sturdy, able to hold tremendous amounts of digital data. And she held it, as if offering it to me.

I lurched forward only to halt myself. Then, slowly and reverently, I took the data-store gently in my hooves and lifted it away, a few droplets of water falling from the device. I held it like some holy relic, staring at it as if I could read its contents through my rapt attention. Whatever was in there, my Queen had held on to it, protecting it even more than the crystals she had left for us. A message for us, her daughters, who had survived her. I needed to know what secrets it held.

Which meant I needed a computer.

I wiped a hoof across my eyes—managing only to smear around the fluids clinging to my carapace—and looked about, finally taking in the room around me.

The chrysalises filled the center of the room, hung from the exposed piping and arranged in a semi-circle around a slightly raised central platform. Machinery was arranged behind and beside each one, with cables and tubes leading to the various cocoons—or, in many cases, splayed out across the ground where they had fallen upon their cocoon's failing. Most of those loose cables lay in puddles, and not all of it came

from the dripping, just-vacated chrysalis. The walls were stained from the trickling of water running over them, and drops fell from some of the pipes, and from the rusted-over sprinkler head set beside the spinning light.

Along the back wall lay pieces of torn-apart machinery. Several empty egg-shaped devices, large enough for a fully grown changeling to fit comfortably inside, had been partially disassembled. Their remains lay discarded in a heap, cables twisted like electronic entrails. What really caught my attention, however, was the faint green glow of a terminal.

It was the first good news I had received since waking up, and I stumbled my way over to it, doing my best to ignore the protests of my legs; my muscles ached from disuse.

The ache made me think. The magical energies within a pod slowed muscle atrophy, but did not eliminate it, and my legs were already feeling the strain. They trembled slightly as I moved, a burning fatigue spreading up through my shoulders. I had been in that chrysalis for a long time. But how long?

A glance at the pod I was hobbling past told me it was a very long time, indeed. Many months, at the very least. Years, most likely. My mind couldn't help pondering the changeling within; how long had it taken for her to die, and then rot away to an empty shell?

I shuddered, which quickly devolved into another coughing fit. A bit more of the viscous fluid dribbled from my lips as I recovered. I did my best to ignore the growing ache in my gut, taking small comfort that the fluids within a changeling pod were not foul-tasting; it had little flavor, like water with a hint of salt and sugar mixed in.

Once I felt sturdy enough, I continued past the pods to the terminal. I needed answers. Information is a powerful weapon, and right then, I was disarmed. I needed to fix that. I needed to arm myself with knowledge so I could begin to figure out what to do next.

And to tell the truth, I could desperately use *something* to distract me from the death that surrounded me. Something, hopefully, that might give some sense that things could, somehow, be made right.

I faced the terminal screen, ignoring how the brief trip had already rendered me short of breath. Stress, I reasoned to myself, as I wiped

away the thick layer of dust on the screen and hit a key. The terminal woke up with a faint whir and hum, the blank glow of the screen replaced by a simple message:

Welcome back, user *CoolBugz*.

I choked out a weak laugh, halfway between humor at the login and crippling depression at finding amusement while surrounded by my dead hive-mates. I'm pretty sure my mind was not terribly stable at the time. I forced myself to swallow my grief and continue on.

With another press of the button, the welcome message disappeared, replaced by a logo in monochrome green text.

Crystal Life Technologies

For a better future

Resuming session...

The terminal hummed for a few more moments as it worked, while I considered the name. It was vaguely familiar, though I couldn't quite place it. The logo vanished before I could remember, presenting me with an alert message and a very rude bleep.

Danger!

S.A. pod #4 (Experimental) failure!

Biomed control system failure!

Lifesign monitoring failure!

Check occupant immediately!

A quick count placed my chrysalis as the fourth from the left. At least there was some small comfort that the computer was concerned with my well-being, for what little that was worth.

I pressed a key to continue, and the warning was replaced by a new one.

Warning!

Primary power system failure.
Emergency power systems activated.
Containment locks released.
All personnel evacuate immediately!

Containment locks? I looked to the door of the room, standing open. It was one of those heavy, powered doors, the kind that probably weighed five hundred pounds and could stop a good-sized explosion. My gaze drifted to my Queen, resting just beside the door. Was that what was responsible for this? Had she woken, as I had, only to be trapped in here by this ‘containment lock’?

I swallowed around the returning lump in my throat, and hit the key again.

Caution!

External environment *is not* safe.
External radiation at 168% of safety threshold.
Minor atmospheric contamination detected.
Moderate water contamination detected.
Environmental seal compromised.
Structural breach detected.
Environmental isolation can not be established.
All personnel evacuate immediately.

I was trembling again. This was not the good news I was hoping for.

A final press of the key cleared away the last of the warning messages, returning the terminal to its standard interface. I ignored the message that opened automatically to look for the time-and-date display. I stared at it in confusion until I realized that there was some sort of error. The time-and-date display was showing nonsense. For some reason, the terminal thought it was a couple centuries in the future.

A little disheartened by the lack of sensible information, I read over the displayed message. It was titled “Daily Report”, and consisted of an extensive list of technical problems. The first entries were the condition of the cocoons, or “S.A. pods, (Experimental)” as it titled

them. Nine reported complete failures, with the last reporting several warnings of degrading systems. Other warnings noted problems for the rest of what seemed to be a sizable facility, such as a pressure failure in the fire suppression system, flooding in “level two”, complete failure of the water processing and pumping system, and the failure of two of three air intake and purification systems.

The only thing of interest I caught in the long list of failures was that three of the eight spark generators had apparently still been working when the daily report was generated. Judging by the warning I had received on starting up the terminal, they had all failed simultaneously today.

At the bottom of the message, the clean and formatted text abruptly changed.

```
***Bugz***
***WakeUpCall***
EnvExternalRad1.68
EnvExternalAirTox0.63
EnvExternalWatTox3.32
EnvExternalAirTempTRUE
EnvExternalAirLiveTRUE
WakeUpCallFALSE
```

Whatever it was, it looked like something crudely hacked onto the end of the existing report. I noted right away that “EnvExternalRad” matched the warning message I had received about external radiation levels. Whatever this was, it seemed to be making note of what conditions were like outside, and if I had to guess, deciding whether or not to wake us up based on what it found.

Or in short, it said the world outside was poison, and I shouldn’t be awake yet.

Really not what I wanted to hear right now, I had thought. I’m pretty sure now that the fact I was silently talking to the terminal within my own head was a sign I was uncomfortably close to simply losing it.

An option flashed near the top of the screen, titled “New unread

daily reports.” It was a moment of hope for me; if this terminal had been generating and storing daily reports ever since we had entered our chrysalises, the number of messages it contained should tell me how long I was gone!

I hit the option, and the screen changed to a list of reports. The “new messages” number exploded.

I was completely unsurprised when it almost instantly hit three digits, and only a little disappointed when it added a fourth digit, barely a second later. I sighed, slumping a little, but I was hardly surprised. A few months was beyond optimistic. A few years was much more reasonable, given the state of the room and the... decay.

The number kept going.

Horror started to dig at my gut as the number climbed higher and higher, refusing to stop. Years rolled by before my eyes.

It hit five digits, and my hindlegs gave out. I sat down, staring numbly. My brain did some quick math, completely without my bidding. Roughly thirty years. And still, it counted higher.

I continued to stare, unmoving, transfixed by the impossible horror of what I was seeing.

Finally, it stopped.

You have 73,741 unread daily reports.

Again my brain did some quick math. If that number was correct—and I really didn’t want to believe it!—that was roughly two hundred years. Part of me suggested that it was wrong. The terminal had the wrong date, maybe it made up a bunch of daily reports for a bunch of days that didn’t actually happen!

Even at the time, I knew I was grasping at straws, but it was either that or drown in the realization that *everything* was dead. My hive was *gone*.

I trembled, leaning against the terminal, and sobbed. Tears flowed down my snout as I shook, on the verge of giving up, but I let out a weak, angry cry as I thumped a hoof against the terminal’s housing. I was alive! My Queen had gone through all this effort for us, and I was

alive! If I was alive, others could be, too! I couldn't just lay there, crying like some spoiled filly as I threw away my Queen's gift!

I pushed myself upright, doing my best to control my sobbing, and wiped at my eyes again, to no better effect than the previous attempt. I hit the "back" button with more force than necessary, eyes narrowing as I did my best to channel all my pain into determination. I glared at the terminal like it was an enemy I needed to extract information from.

A quick search turned up a socket, and I plugged in the data-store. The terminal hummed again, punctuated by the occasional whine. It kept working, and working, and working. After half a minute, it finally displayed a message.

Error: could not read external device.
File system corrupted.

The fire that had been growing in me died. I managed to hold on for a couple seconds against the wave of depression, but I finally buckled with a loud sob. I slid down against the terminal until I lay curled up before it, trembling and crying.

My Queen's final gift, and it was denied to me.

My sobbing mixed with coughing as I spat up a bit more fluids, my chest aching as the muscles complained. A particularly bad coughing fit left me groaning, clutching my gut. At least it gave me something else to occupy my mind. The desperate sadness was shunted to the background as I simply focused on breathing.

I think that's the moment that I really returned. The moment my brain finally woke and came up to speed. The grogginess from my extended rest still left me in a faint haze, but as I focused on the burning ache in my chest and belly, my mind started to tear apart the situation, evaluating it. My crying died away as I lay there, thinking.

I am on my own again, I thought. That wasn't so bad, even if the reason for it was horrific. I was an Infiltrator. I worked on my own regularly, often for months at a time. I had been trained to work independently, to approach and deal with problems without the guarantee of assistance. Yes, I didn't know if anything of my hive had survived, es-

pecially if it had really been as long as the terminal claimed it had been. But I was equipped to work on my own in uncertain situations.

If anything of my hive *had* survived, I could find it.

My Queen had brought us here for a purpose. She brought us here to preserve the hive.

I had a mission.

Slowly, I pushed myself back up onto wobbly legs. I blinked away the last of the tears, refocusing on the terminal. After a deep, steadying breath, I reached out, hitting a key to back out to the main menu once again, and started searching through the rest of the terminal.

The search turned up little. There was no personal correspondence, though there were lots of research notes that flew over my head. The only thing I got out of that was the mention of “suspended animation”. It led me to finally recognize where I recognized “Crystal Life Technologies” from. C.L.T. was some small-bit company that had managed to have dealings with five of the six ministries of the Equestrian government, thanks to its research in cryonics and suspended animation. It wasn’t a big player, not even close, but those connections drew enough interest to be one of the companies we kept tabs on.

Unfortunately, that recognition didn’t help me any, now.

The terminal seemed to be used solely for research and operation of the “experimental” suspended animation pods. There was nothing useful to me. It didn’t even have a map.

I sighed as I turned away from it. Looking back at the rest of the room prompted a moment of hesitation and sadness, but it faded quickly. I had cried too much already. Now it was time to act.

Step one: survive.

Considering my situation, I knew that might be a bit of a challenge all on its own. I had hardly done anything since waking, and already my body was exhausted. My magic was almost depleted, and I was sure I’d need plenty of food and water soon. I had no knowledge of what was out there, except for the vague environmental reports the terminal had provided. Sadly, of all the technical jargon and analysis the terminal had contained, none of it gave even a vague idea of what those environmental measurements actually meant. I’d have to dig

around in the actual code, and I didn't have the tools for that.

Not that I really needed fine details to get the idea that "minor atmospheric contamination" was probably a bad thing.

I needed supplies, and I needed a way to carry them. I retrieved the data-store, hoping that I might be able to extract the data it had held with the proper tools. The love crystals were definitely coming with me, with the hope that I might someday acquire enough love that I might need to store some of it—and if I'm entirely honest, in part because they had come from my Queen. And, since I didn't want to spend more of my limited magic than absolutely necessary by levitating them all the time, I needed something to carry it all in.

A quick scan of the room turned up one of those ubiquitous wall-mounted Ministry of Peace medical boxes, the paint mostly peeled away. Half of the box was badly corroded by the years of water trickling down the wall and over it, but it would serve my purposes. It took a couple good jerks to free it from the rusted mounting brackets, and I set it down on a table and opened the box.

It had once held a healing potion, but it had long ago broken, the liquid pooling and ruining most of the contents. Only a single bandage had survived. I set that aside and dumped out the rest of the contents. Glass shards clattered across the table, along with the rotten remains of a couple more bandages, a pair of corroded injectors, their labels decayed away and their contents likely ruined, and, of all things, a badly rusted Equestrian Army service pistol.

I stared at the pistol for a couple seconds, unable to help thinking that the M.o.P. would have been quite upset to find such a thing stored within one of their *medical* kits.

Still, a pistol might come in handy. They weren't useful for infiltration and impersonation—in fact, weapons could be a major liability!—but they could be useful in case of emergencies. Every Infiltrator received basic weapons training because of that. Some, those trained up for more *direct* action, received even more, but I was not one of those operatives. Still, I had practiced on a model just like that pistol, albeit in much better condition.

Unfortunately, the condition of this pistol was far too poor. A few

quick tugs revealed that the slide had rusted firmly in place, and I expected the internals had fared no better. It would probably need serious work to ever fire again, and I would hardly know where to start. I might be able to cludge my way into getting it working if I had a full tool shop and many hours to poke and prod at it, but that was time I simply didn't have.

Leaving the gun behind, I tapped the medical box against the edge of the table until it was more or less dry, then placed the crystals and data-recorder within it, with the latter carefully wrapped in the intact bandage.

I closed the box, picked it up in my mouth, and looked around the room. My eyes lingered on each of my fallen sisters before stopping with my Queen. I knew I couldn't leave them. I had to go, but I couldn't just leave them, lying there, abandoned.

I stepped out the door and into the hallway. It was long and dark, illuminated at one end by another spinning emergency light. The entire area screamed utilitarianism and practicality: all bare concrete, with a simple metal grate along the floor for traction. Pipes ran along the ceiling under dead lights. One pipe had broken in half, jagged ends fallen to the floor. Whatever they had carried had stopped flowing long ago. At least it was dry, unlike most of the floor in the room I had awakened in. The regularly spaced drains seemed to still be doing their job.

I set the medical box beside the door, and began the slow process of gathering the remains of my fallen sisters. Their husks were disturbingly light, producing hollow drumbeats any time a part of the empty exoskeletons bumped against anything. I winced every single time.

The last two were the trickiest, still contained within their pods. I looked at the first, floating almost ghost-like in the murky fluids. The rotating light gave the sight a spectacularly creepy vibe, occasionally lighting the silhouetted form within.

With no knife or other cutting implement, I knew it was going to be messy, but I wasn't going to let that prevent me from giving my sister this one final honor.

So, lacking a more obvious solution, I stabbed my horn through

the membrane, just as I had done to free myself.

It was not, in retrospect, one of my brighter decisions.

The chrysalis burst around my horn with a spray of fetid muck. I recoiled in surprise even before the smell hit me; the overpowering combination of rot and bile sent me staggering blindly away, eyes screwed shut. I stumbled into and scrambled over several pieces of machinery as I fled the horrible geyser of awfulness, until I finally collapsed in the back corner of the room, heaving.

The first few heaves vomited up what fluids I had ingested from my own chrysalis, but they didn't stop there. My gut clenched again and again, my muscles burning as my stomach tried to purge itself further. I used my hooves in an attempt to wipe the vile fluid from my face, groaning between heaves, and doing my best to ignore the few tiny bits of squishy *stuff* that I flung away.

I could barely stand by the time my gut finally relented. I only made it a few feet, to a shallow puddle of murky water, and sank down to the ground again. Every muscle hurt, protesting even at the mild activity of splashing some of the water over my face. I'd never wanted a bath as badly in my entire life.

Once I had finally washed away enough of the mess to no longer feel *completely* revolted, I heaved myself up to sit back against the row of gutted machinery. I was panting, a hoof draped across my snout in an attempt to block out some of the vile scent filling the room. My body practically screamed at me. I would have gladly lain down and slept, but I knew that wasn't an option. I likely had a long couple of days ahead of me if I was going to survive, and every moment I spent idle meant another moment closer to death.

The deflated chrysalis taunted me from across the room, the sodden and decayed husk tangled up in its dripping remains. Reluctantly, I rose back to unstable hooves, and started slowly rooting among the scattered parts. One of the egg-shaped pods in the back eventually gave me what I was looking for. Part of its curved, white outer shell had been broken away when it had been disassembled, leaving a large chunk of plastic with a jagged edge. I grabbed it in my mouth and got to work.

Cutting the final strips of the pod away to free my deceased sister

was awkward with my crude blade, but it was over quickly enough. I dragged the husk over to join the others, ignoring how slimy the shell felt under my hooves, and then it was time to deal with the final pod.

I gripped the plastic shard in my hooves, giving a couple beats of my wings as I balanced on my hindlegs, and jammed it into the pod. It took a couple jabs, but the chrysalis tore open just like the last, though without me getting a faceful of its contents. I drew back and retreated to the hall, taking the opportunity to get some relatively fresh air and let my aching muscles rest while the cocoon drained.

It was even harder forcing myself to rise again, but I knew it was almost done. A little bit of crude sawing and a few moments of dragging, and I had finally gathered all of my fallen hive-mates together. My Queen lay there, still impressive even in death, her daughters clustered close around her. I suppose it was some small comfort that I didn't recognize any of my sisters. A few looked vaguely familiar, but that was it. Perhaps I had interacted with a few of them in a professional sense, but I didn't see any of those I had been close to. It left some tiny hope that they had survived, as I had.

Eventually, I lowered my head, pushing a little of my dwindling magic into my horn. I knew every bit of magic I spent was a little less to sustain me, but I had to do this one last thing. They deserved that much.

A green flame burst into being beneath my Queen's chest and rapidly spread. The dry, empty husks caught quickly; the more sodden remains took longer, but soon they too succumbed to the flame. The room flickered and danced in the light of the green fire.

I rested, watching the flames transform their bodies one final time. Eventually those flames faded, guttered, and died, leaving nothing but ash in their wake.

I sighed as the light died away. There was nothing left to tie me to that place. My duty to my fallen kin fulfilled, I stood, turned, and left.

Retrieving my commandeered medical box, I set off to find my way out of the facility. The hall only went one way, the other blocked off by a door that had only opened a couple inches before wedging firmly in place. I had to hope that wasn't the way out, as I was certain I couldn't move it even with a full reservoir of magic.

Rooms branched off from the hall, pricking at my curiosity, but I didn't have the time or energy to indulge more than a quick glance. Most were uninteresting. There was a cleaning closet, restrooms, and even some quarters. A couple rooms looked much like the one I had woken up in, though they were in various states of completion. One held a dozen of those egg-shaped pods I had seen before, though only half of them were assembled and hooked up. Those rooms that were not damp from leaking water were caked in dust.

Eventually the hall opened into a larger room, looking much like a lobby. The far side had partially collapsed, the mess of rock and rubble corroborating my impression that I was underground; unless this place had been built to contain a small megaspell or had secret passages riddled throughout it, there was no way an above-ground structure would have so much dead space between rooms.

I could finally make out the voice, repeating an endless loop from a speaker in the wall. It was a mare's voice, speaking calmly, though the speaker warbled badly.

"Attention all personnel: please exit the facility and proceed to designated evacuation locations."

Opposite of the partial cave-in were wide doors leading into a vertical shaft. The stairs that had once occupied the space had collapsed, leaving a heap of rubble partially submerged in the water below. Above, a doorway opened out into the void of the collapsed stairway.

A short flight landed me on the upper landing, a warmth spreading through my chest as my wing muscles began to join all the others crying out at my abuse. I ignored them and continued on down the hall I found myself in.

The first room I glanced in was filled with pony skeletons. At least twenty of them had been heaped up in the small storage room, laid two or three deep. I quickly continued on.

The next room held a completely different form of desolation. The room, about the same size as the one I had woken in, had been destroyed in a fire. The walls were scorched black, and the multitude of storage boxes within had been destroyed. The room would have been a treasure trove if it had been intact. One crate had held at least

twenty medical boxes, now warped and ruined from the flames. Another held the remains of a couple dozen rifles. Beside that were the twisted remains of a metal box that had been torn apart from the inside; I was guessing that had been ammunition for the rifles, or maybe explosives, and I wondered if it had succumbed to the fire or been its source. Along the side wall hung six sets of armored security barding, complete with riot-style helmets, now all tattered rags, loose-hanging plates, and warped plastic.

If I had the time and the skill, I might have been able to cobble some things together from the remains, but I had neither of those things.

One box sat outside the room, and as such, had been spared the flames. I opened the lid, and was greeted with the sight of dozens of military-style rations. I quickly opened my medical box, loading it until I could barely close the lid over them. Then I tore open another ration, scarfing down the contents. My stomach, still aching from the earlier exertion, felt slightly more comfortable.

Tossing aside the wrappers, I continued on. There were more rooms, and more signs of decay. There were even a spattering of bullet holes in one of the walls, and another bore a scorched crater left by some sort of magical energy weapon.

The further I went, the more familiar it started to feel. It was vague at first, walking by a small lounge area that I felt I had seen before, in better lighting than the flickering emergency lights that dotted the facility. A look back down the hallway I was walking gave a sense of *deja vu*, even with the lights hanging unevenly and the water dripping from broken pipes. When I stepped out into the lobby at the end of the hall, I could swear I'd stood there before.

A faint breeze of fresh air met me, drawing me toward the glow coming in through the open door. I stepped into the doorway, and I remembered.



I remembered the end of the world.

I had been flying.

I left Appleloosa that morning. I had woken to an encrypted mes-

sage I had never expected to receive. It was an emergency recall, and not just any. It was the most extreme category; drop everything immediately, abandon all resources, and flee the country as fast as you possibly can. It was the kind of message we dreaded getting, the sort of warning one would get moments before the Ministry of Morale burst in.

And it was being sent out to every single Infiltrator in the world.

I fled. I didn't call into the shipping department that I worked at to excuse my impending absence. I didn't grab anything to take with me. I simply changed into a pegasus, ran out the back door, and flew as fast as I could. The message had given me a rendezvous point, only a couple hours away.

I was flying when a flash lit up the sky. I continued flying as more lights flashed behind me, and then off to the sides. Then another flash, but in front of me, far away enough that it had to be beyond the border of Equestria. Far off to the south, in the Badlands. There were no pony settlements there. No zebras. Only changelings.

As more flashes lit the horizon, I dove toward my destination.



I stepped out into a compound that I had remembered seeing from the air. The nearby shelter had collapsed, smashing the pair of skywagons that had been parked beneath it. The guard shack, looking over the broken gate in the chain-link fence, was missing its door and windows, its paint having mostly peeled away. Only the train tracks looked more or less intact, leading away toward the main line in the valley beyond. A worn sign stood beside the guard shack, faded letters declaring this to be, "Crystal Life Technologies Experimental Site Alpha."

Behind me, the small concrete entryway poked out of the side of a hill, just as I remembered.

I didn't recognize the huge *thing* lying just beyond the fence, but judging from the way it smoked and sizzled, I was guessing it was new. It was as large as the skywagon shelter, with a smooth, slightly curved surface on one side, and ragged edges and bits of metal on the other. It looked like it had once been part of a large structure of some sort, though the deep furrow gouged through the earth suggested it had

traveled a good ways from there. I couldn't imagine the amount of force it had required to throw something so large.

Looking away from the strange debris, I was surprised at just how bleak the place looked. Sure, much of southern Equestria was fairly barren and dry, but there was plenty of life to be found if you knew where to look. I saw nothing like that, there. I saw only a few living plants, and they were brown and sickly, barely clinging to life. A few dead trees dotted nearby ridges, roots partially exposed in the crumbling, dry soil. Even the air, while fresh in comparison to the musty scent inside the facility, seemed stale and bland.

At least it was sunny and pleasantly warm, though the dark clouds that filled half the sky, dominating the horizon, threatened to change that. The more distant lands were darkened by their shadows, looking dull and oppressive. The clouds seemed particularly unruly and chaotic, as if the pegasi arranging them couldn't be bothered to care, and had simply tossed them wherever.

I set down my box, taking advantage of a deep puddle—only slightly muddy—to finally get an acceptable pass at bathing. Being plastered with dried ichor and smelling of rot would probably not help me survive the next few days.

A couple minutes later I emerged, feeling a little better about myself.

I reclaimed my medical box, and looked around once more. I had a pretty good idea of what direction was what, if my hazy memory of this place was right. I couldn't remember much of what happened after I arrived—mostly just my Queen, in all her glory!—but I was fairly certain I had come flying in over the skywagon shelter.

So that just left the question of what direction to go. Ultimately, I wanted to go south; if there were any sign of my hive's survival, the hive itself would be the first place to look. Unfortunately, pony settlements were increasingly sparse the further south you traveled. Then again, who knew what had changed while I was asleep. Especially, though I still wasn't ready to accept it, if it had been two centuries.

North would lead me deeper into Equestria. Sure, I'd seen the flashes in the distance, and I'd seen the predictions of the effects of a full megaspell exchange; major population centers would have been reduced

to ash, but two hundred years was a long time to recover—though my mind momentarily rebelled at using such an absurd figure as a *good* thing. In any case, there would almost certainly be more ponies in that direction.

But it also took me further from my hive.

Eventually, I settled on a third option: east. Dodge City lay somewhere in that direction, and there were many smaller towns that likely would have escaped targeting. It would be as close to my hive as I could reasonably expect to find a good number of ponies.

It seemed to be an ideal compromise.

I pulled out a cable from the wreckage of a skywagon, running it through the brackets on the back of my medical box and tying it into a loop. It was difficult to do without magic, but I'd spent a lot of time imitating an earth pony. I slipped the loop around my neck, spread my wings, and took to the air.

I only managed to make the next ridge before I had to land, my wings aching horribly, but that part at least went to plan. I had no idea what was out there, so the plan was to go slow and careful. I landed just before the ridge and crept up to peer over, instead of just flying blindly over it. It took longer, but even with the frequent pauses to scout ahead and rest my wings, I figured it would take me less than a day to get to my destination. Probably half that, even.

After a couple minutes' rest, I was ready to move on to the next rise, perhaps half a mile away across a shallow valley. My wings ached even worse as I landed again, but it was progress.

My rests grew longer with each stop, quickly seeding doubts as to my expected rate of travel.

Then, on the fifth stop, I saw movement. The railroad tracks had snaked their way through the sparse terrain, and just half a mile away to the south, it curved around a small hill. I had peeked over the ridge just in time to see the hindquarters of some quadruped disappearing around the corner, following the tracks.

I waited just long enough to make sure nobody came back, then took off again, flying low over the ground. I ignored the protests of my wings and the slowly spreading fire of overworked muscles, limping the

final stretch before practically collapsing on the slope of the small hill. I crept up, slowly peering over it.

I was rewarded with the wonderful sight of ponies! Five of them, two mares and three stallions, along with a pair of cattle. They were armed, too. The ponies, that is, not the cattle, who simply carried large packs. The ponies had various small arms, and two of the stallions wore light, armored barding. They didn't look like any military group. They seemed disorganized and irregularly equipped. Then again, maybe they were deserters? Or were they simply armed travelers? I had no way to tell.

Whatever the case, it was all secondary in importance. I had found ponies!

Now, I suppose I should make it clear: I don't hate ponies. I know some ponies got their entire impression of changelings from Queen Chrysalis and her hive, but that would be a very incomplete picture. Me, I actually *like* ponies. Sure, they can be skittish and scared of things they don't understand, and yes, they did not handle the tremendous stress of the decades-long war they found themselves in very well, but they're basically decent beings. Few creatures held so much love, even if their hardships had made them a bit paranoid about sharing it.

My point is, my hive didn't view ponies as being just prey, much less enemies. If anything, they're more like... valued livestock. I know, that probably sounds horrible, but it's the best comparison I can think of. I won't try to spin it, to portray us as some sort of silent, benevolent protectors. We had selfish reasons for our actions. Ponies were good food, and we wanted to keep that food safe. That was our primary focus.

But when you spend much of your life living among ponies, forming friendships in order to get the love your hive needs, it's hard to not start liking the ponies that feed you. They could never compete with the bond I shared with my sisters, much less my Queen, but I still enjoyed their company.

So finding a small group of them here offered me not only food, but the chance of some small degree of comfort.

That was getting a bit ahead of myself, though. Before I could do any of that, I had to gain their acceptance. To do that, I wanted to get

a better idea of what I might be walking into.

I hung back, keeping myself as hidden as possible as I watched them. They were following the tracks, and while the cattle merely plodded on without concern, the ponies kept looking to the sky. One mare, the only unicorn in the group, had a huge smile on her face as she looked around the sky. She stumbled a few times, not watching where her hooves were going, but each time her gaze turned upwards again.

The other mare and the unarmored stallion also looked quite pleased, walking close side-by-side and quietly talking with each other. I was guessing they were a couple.

As for the other two stallions, one looked to be as unconcerned as the cattle, though he wore a pleased expression. The other stallion was the most severe of the group, his eyes scanning the horizon, looking for threats. Yet even his gaze was drawn upward on occasion, the tension in his stance fading for a few moments. Then his eyes dropped, and he returned to looking around.

I drew back just a bit to hide myself as I looked up, to see if I could find what was drawing their attention. I didn't. There wasn't anything up there but the sky.

I returned to observing them.

The next two hours were pretty repetitive. I watched while they walked. Once they were out of sight, I flew up to the next piece of cover to observe again. Ten minutes of watching, a minute of flying, repeat. I didn't mind the pace. It gave my poor wings time to recover between flights. By the time they stopped, with the sky steadily darkening, I was actually feeling halfway rested.

The ponies pulled off beside the tracks, unpacking bedrolls. Finally seeing the cattle from the front as they turned, I was surprised to see that one of them had two heads, and the other, while having only one, looked badly malformed.

Soon the ponies had a small campfire going. The unarmored stallion tossed ingredients into a cooking pot while the others relaxed. The severe-looking stallion kept a wary eye out even as he lay back against a rock, a crude-looking rifle set in easy reach.

I got a bit better look at the small arsenal they carried. The other

armored stallion had a similar rifle slung on his back, while the couple had holstered pistols. The unicorn mare had a very long and narrow rifle, cradled in her forelegs as she lay back. She was still smiling.

The amount of weapons on display was a little concerning. If they carried weapons, that must mean there was something dangerous out there. My first thought was zebras, but it seemed a little silly to think that the war would still be going on after so much time. Maybe it was dangerous wildlife? Sure, I'd seen hardly any signs of life, and most of that was just desert brush, but that didn't mean *nothing* lived out here. There always seemed to be some horrible monster wandering into Equestria and causing drama.

With that thought, I was even more thankful to have run across ponies so soon. If there was something dangerous out there, I didn't want to run into it on my own. I found myself glancing backwards to ensure nothing was sneaking up on me, and becoming very aware that the sunlight was quickly fading.

I would have liked to observe longer, but I figured they'd likely be going to sleep soon. Considering the vigilance the one pony displayed, I expected they would have someone keeping an eye out, making it hard to sneak up even in the dark. And, to be honest, I was thinking that I really didn't want to wait out there, on my own, for whatever had made them so wary.

I silently retreated back down the slope, getting well out of sight. I didn't want them to see the flash of my magic.

Once I was far enough away, hidden in a small depression beside the tracks, I called up a little bit of magic. The green flames washed over me, replacing black chitin with a smooth gray coat. I shook my head, fluffing out my new silver mane, long and sleek, and flicked my new tail. Finally, I stood up, looking over myself to ensure I had gotten the form correct. I hardly had to worry, though; it was the same form I had worn for a few years in Appleloosa.

It seemed an ideal choice. With no pegasi and only a single unicorn, an earth pony form should fit right in, and the fairly even split of sexes gave me no reason to not remain female. The cutie mark of a closed scroll was amazingly versatile; given just a bit of creativity, I could make

it mean whatever I wanted. I could even use the same name: Whisper Winds.

Now, I know re-using disguises is generally a bad idea, but all things considered, I really doubted I would run into anyone who might recognize me. For that matter, I'm sure some might think that simply tacking "Winds" onto the end of my real name was a bad idea, but it's not like anyone had a database of changeling names to check it against. As long as I didn't re-use it for a different disguise, it was just fine, and it can be very beneficial to have a name you're used to hearing.

With one final check of my new form, I returned to the ridge. Transformation was an easy spell, but I could feel how my hunger grew at the small expenditure. The sooner I could make some "friends", the better.

I remember feeling a bit of irritation that my new earth pony muscles should feel just as worn out as my natural ones, but that's just how shapeshifting goes. A proper meal would fix that.

Settling in and carefully peeking out once again, I saw nothing had changed during my short absence. They were all settled in and talking.

I braced myself, mentally going over several quick "facts" for an improvised backstory. Then I put on a pleasant smile, stood, and began to walk toward them.

They didn't notice me, at first. The only one who seemed focused on looking outside of their small circle was facing away from me. The others were too preoccupied with their conversation. Soon I was close enough to make out what was being said.

"...But seriously, rainbows!" the smiling mare said, looking up again to the darkening sky. "I've never even seen a rainbow before."

"We know," the vigilant stallion said with a resigned tone. "You've only told us like fifty—"

He had turned to look squarely at the mare, which brought me into his edge of his vision. His reaction speed was impressive. He immediately bit down on the grip of his rifle as he rolled onto his hooves. I staggered to a stop, suddenly looking down a frightfully large barrel.

His voice came out harsh and menacing, his eyes narrowing at me. "Don't you fucking *move*."

It was at that moment I began to worry that I had made a terrible mistake.

Chapter Two

Ways of the Wasteland

I was not entirely a stranger to stressful situations. Infiltrating a group required intruding into a social dynamic where you couldn't know all the variables. A mistake in judgement or inability to adapt and improvise could easily result in imprisonment or worse. The threat of the Ministry of Morale always lurked in the background of our thoughts, made worse for the fear that our failure could be a danger to our sisters. Ponies had the terrifying ability to rip memories from our very minds and turn them against us; death was preferable.

One could not be an Infiltrator if one was weak of will.

Yet I have to admit, I had no experience with the fear that comes from staring down the barrel of a gun.

The stallion practically growled around the rifle's bit. "Who the hell are you? And what the hell are you doing here?"

The other ponies were quickly collecting themselves. The other armored stallion, a bit larger than the one questioning me, had retrieved his own rifle. He trained it on me, but he seemed much more calm; wary, but not angry.

The unicorn mare lifted her weapon as well, but didn't level it at me. She looked uncertainly over the scene, her weapon pointed in the air above my head. It was only then that I could see the glint of a lens at the end of the long, thin weapon. She was carrying a magical energy weapon. Two, in fact, as she had a pistol of some sort tucked into a holster.

I also couldn't help but note the PipBuck she had, though she didn't wear it on her leg. Instead, it hung on a strap looped around her neck.

The couple—both older ponies, I noted—looked even more uncertain. The mare had her gun in her mouth, but it was still pointing at the ground. The stallion hadn't drawn his.

I remembered then that I had been asked a question, and I was fairly certain that it was generally a good idea to oblige well-armed individuals

when they ask you something. That goes doubly so when they seem so incredibly angry. Sure, I had expected a bit of wariness at my approach, but between the profanity and the amount of arms being pointed in my direction, I was concerned that I had done something terrible to offend them. “M-my name is Whisper Winds,” I said, trying to aim for just the right amount of nervous and innocent in my tone. “I saw your fire, so I wanted to come and say hello...”

That didn’t seem to impress him. “Really? You’re telling me you were just wandering around the wastes and *happened* to stumble across us?” He was surprisingly good at talking around his gun’s grip, and at keeping his aim steady while doing so. The combination made me think he might be an experienced combatant. That would explain the attitude, too; plenty of ponies responded poorly to the stress of combat. Some grew particularly erratic, which was of special concern when a flick of his tongue could end my life.

Fortunately, the unarmored older stallion came to my rescue. “Easy there, Sharps. She don’t exactly look like some terrifying raider, now does she?”

“Lots of dangerous ponies out there that aren’t raiders, Pops,” the pony I took to be named Sharps replied. The gun still refused to waver.

“Lots of potential customers, too, so long as you don’t go shootin’ ‘em, first,” the older stallion said as he stepped up beside Sharps. “And if you call me Pops again, you can just go findin’ your own dinner.” He delivered the last line with a disarming smile, as if to tell Sharps he was just playing. ‘Pops’ was a talker, it seemed.

Sharps lowered his gun a hair, visibly considering the other pony’s words for several seconds before finally rolling his eyes. “Fine, but I’m keeping an eye on her, all the same.” He proceeded to sit again, his rifle resting in easy reach. Contrary to his own assertion, his eyes instead swept every direction except mine, searching for other threats.

“Don’t mind him,” the older stallion said, smiling as he stepped up to me. “Sharps means well, even if he can be a bit prickly at times. My name’s Long Haul, and this lovely mare here is Silver.” He gestured to the mare that I assumed was his partner. She was pale white to his orange, and about the same age, though she wore the years quite well.

She even smiled and nodded to me, once she had re-holstered her pistol.

"You've already met Sharps," Long Haul continued, before motioning to the other armored stallion. "This here is Thunderhead. Don't mind if he doesn't say much, that's just his way." Thunderhead gave a small smile and nodded, a scruffy blond mane bobbing over his face. His rifle hung from its strap, set aside for the moment.

"And the lady there with the long gun is Starlight."

With the potential conflict seemingly averted, Starlight smiled brightly at me, giving a friendly wave of a hoof. The dark-blue mare seemed a fair bit younger than the other ponies.

"Now then," Long Haul said, turning his smile back to me. "How about you tell me what a pretty little filly like you is doing out all on her own in the middle of nowhere?"

It seemed he didn't entirely trust my sudden appearance, either, even if he was being much nicer about it than Sharps was. That was just fine with me, though. I much preferred a confrontation of words over arms. It was time to put my improvised little backstory to work. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you all. It's just... I have no idea where I am, and you're the first ponies I've seen."

Sharps gave a quiet grunt, but Long Haul simply nodded. "Well, you must have come from somewhere, am I right? Figure if you know where you came from, you gotta know where you are."

"Oh, yeah, of course. I came from a farm." Because an isolated homestead was a perfect excuse to have absolutely no knowledge of current events. "Back that way," I added, sweeping a hoof vaguely in the direction I came.

"Wait," Sharps said, abandoning his scanning of the horizon to look back at me. "You're trying to tell us you lived on an actual, working farm, and just decided... what, 'fuck it, I'm going for a walk?'"

I winced at the harshness of that, though I appreciated the disapproving look Long Haul shot his way. "N-no, I—"

"Wait!" Starlight said, her pale-blue eyes lighting up. "You went by the tower, then, right? You saw what happened?"

Sharps groaned. "Enough about the fucking tower already!"

I quickly looked back, to see if I could catch any sign of what she

was talking about. "I... don't know. What happened to the tower?"

"It exploded," she cheerfully replied. "With rainbows!"

With rainbows, I silently repeated in my mind. Yeah, that sounded so incredibly *pony*. At the same time, I *hadn't* seen an explosion. She seemed likely to pump me for details about it, and I was sure to get something wrong. I had to improvise to cover my ignorance. "...I guess that might explain some things," I slowly replied, reaching up a hoof to rub at the side of my head. "I woke up a few hours ago with a horrible headache, but I didn't remember falling asleep. And there was this big chunk of wreckage nearby. It was the size of a house and looked like it just dropped right out of the sky."

And, you know, some big explosion happens at the same time I woke up from a (possibly) two-hundred year nap? That seemed unlikely to be a coincidence.

"Woah," Starlight said, surprised. "You must have been pretty close. Wait, does that mean you missed all the rainbows?"

Sharps cut in again. "How about we get back to where she walked off a damn farm to go wandering the Wasteland? I want to hear about that."

Long Haul made a silencing gesture toward him before looking to me. "Well, how about it, miss? Seems kinda odd to walk off from someplace with food, without havin' any idea where you're goin'."

Yeah, it wouldn't, but... "My... my mother died recently. She was the one who did the farming. I-I could never figure it out. Heck, I couldn't even grow a weed." I swallowed, managing to tear up a bit as I put on an act of trying to stay strong. "I-I mean, I spent all my time reading all these dumb old books instead, and then she... I couldn't..." I paused, sniffing, then took a deep, steadying breath. "If I didn't find that box of military rations in those ruins earlier today, I might have starved. I'm not even sure how long it had been since I had something to eat."

Long Haul nodded understandingly. "So the farm's a bust, and you went out lookin' to find some food?"

"Yeah," I said. "Or better yet, some town where I could get a job. It's just... I don't really know anything outside the farm and what I've read in a bunch of old books."

"I see," Long Haul said, nodding, and raised a hoof to his chin. After a few seconds, he looked back to me. "Well, tell you what. We're heading to a little town called Rust to do some trading. If—"

"Oh, *hell* no!" Sharps said, rising to his hooves again. "Look, Pops. You're paying me to protect you. You're not paying me to foalsit some tag-along, and especially not some weird filly we found in the middle of nowhere. She could be working with some fucking raiders, buddying up with traveling merchants just to see if they're worth hitting."

Long Haul rolled his eyes. "She don't look like no raider to me, Sharps."

"That'd be the point," Sharps said. "Besides, I didn't say she was a raider. You know they've been getting worse, lately, that's why you hired me. Maybe they hit some other group, and they're forcing her to work for them. You know, 'do this or your mom gets it.'" He glared at me. "That what this is?"

I almost recoiled at the accusation, but I held firm; it would have likely been seen as confirmation of his suspicions. I shook my head. "No."

Still, I was concerned about this talk of raiders. "Dangerous ponies," Sharps had called them, and evidently the reason for such a hostile greeting. They were scared of other ponies.

How bad had things gotten?

"Sharps, look here. I get that you're tryin' to protect us, but this is my little caravan, and I ain't leaving somepony out here all on her own. It ain't my way."

"Yeah, fine, whatever," Sharps said. "But this still isn't the job I signed on for. You start bringing in extra ponies like some fucking Wasteland tour group, you're making *my* job harder."

"Fair enough," Long Haul said in a reasonable tone. "I figure most of the work is in guarding the brahmin and the group as a whole rather than any one individual, and we're halfway to Rust already, but I'll round up a bit. Figure an extra... five percent on your pay should be generous enough."

I have to admit, I kind of liked the old guy. He kept his cool, negotiating a compromise to satisfy both sides of the situation. I could appreciate that.

Sharps stared back for a moment before grunting again. "Fine," he grumbled, sitting once again.

"Um..." Starlight started to say, raising her hoof.

"Y'all too, yes," Long Haul said, to which Starlight grinned even more.

Thunderhead just gave a soft, pleased-sounding grunt.

"Thank you," I said to Long Haul, who turned his smile to me.

"Just doing what's decent, miss," he said, giving a little chuckle. "Can't really be a good merchant if I'm turnin' ponies away and all that. Now, I'll be 'spectin' you to pitch in if we need an extra hoof and all that, and if you got anything you can spare to make up for the extra expense, I'd appreciate it, but I'm not gonna insist."

"I'd like to," I told him, "but I'm afraid I don't have much to offer, other than those rations I found." I almost didn't want to mention them, but I figured that he was the kind of pony who would appreciate honesty. I also figured that a pony who was so charitable in giving up bits for my benefit wouldn't deprive me of my only food, and I was right.

"Heck, it don't feel right takin' food from you if that's all you got," he said, even frowning at the thought. His smile returned a moment later. "Still, I could probably get some pretty good caps for some military rations. How 'bout a trade, then? You trade a meal of your rations, and I give you a meal of my own cooking?" He chuckled, putting a hoof to his chest. "I promise, it can't taste any worse than two-hundred year old army chow."

"*Ehahaha!*" I blurted out, then cringed and placed a hoof over my face. It took a few moments before I was able to still the sudden rapid breathing and re-order my thoughts. I lowered my hoof, doing my best to look as if I weren't in a very fragile mental state. "S-sorry. It's... been a very exhausting day, both physically and mentally." I smiled. "I think that's a very fair offer, thank you."

"Well... okay then," he said, an eyebrow quirked questioningly at the outburst, but he refrained from asking. "Grab a seat by the fire and make yourself at home. Dinner should be ready soon."

I thanked him again and carefully made my way to an open spot near the fire. He returned to his pot, pulling out a few more ingredients to add to the mix. I had hardly sat down—my limbs thanking me for

the chance to rest—before Starlight leaned in. “So, you lived on a farm?”

“Yes, I did,” I said with a nod, and returned her smile as evenly as I could manage, given my shaky mental state at the time. She seemed eager and excitable, which might also mean easily swayed. A good, quick “friendship” had sounded particularly appetizing, at the moment.

Of course, it also prompted her to ask a question I would rather avoid. ■

“So, what was it like?”

“It was... boring,” I said, exhausting the majority of my knowledge of farming within three words. I diverted. “It’s why I spent so much time reading old books. All stuff from the war, and before.” I swallowed, trying to fight down my growing nervousness. “What he said... has it really been two hundred years?”

“Since... what, since the megaspells? Yeah, something like that.” She floated up her PipBuck, hitting a couple buttons as she looked over the screen. “Two hundred and two years,” she said, dropping it to hang from her neck again.

“Ah,” I said, suppressing a tremble as my hopes were crushed under the unyielding hooves of fact.

After a couple moments of my silence, Starlight decided to prompt me for further conversation. “So... what are you planning on doing, now?”

Her question snapped me out of my silent mourning. “I... don’t really know. Hopefully someone at Rust will have a job I can do.” I disliked that so much of my plan amounted to nothing more than improvisation.

“I’m sure you’ll find something,” she said. “I, uh... I know it can be a little hard, suddenly being on your own, but don’t worry. There’s plenty of opportunity out there.”

Sharps gave a dismissive exhale, but she didn’t seem to notice.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling again, which made Starlight smile more. “Problem is, I don’t even know what’s out there.”

“Afraid I can’t help much with that,” Starlight said. “I only hooked up with Long Haul a week ago—”

Sharps quietly muttered. “It’s only been a week?”

“—And I didn’t travel much before that. I lived in Dodge Junction,

a little run-down town not far from the Dodge City ruins. Traveled between the two every now and then for scavenging runs, but that was about it.”

I was disappointed to hear that Dodge City was in ruins. Not surprised, mind you, but still disappointed. A large pony settlement would have been convenient. I forced myself to continue on, rather than slipping into silence once again; I wasn’t going to make friends by being reclusive. “Why did you leave?”

She shrugged. “Eh. It was just... well, boring.” She flashed me a smile at hitting a common element between us. “I wanted to get out there and *do* something. Long Haul came through on his rounds, and I thought it was perfect. I’m a great shot, and I’ve got the most awesome gun in the Wasteland. A guard job lets me earn caps, *and* I get to help keep ponies safe. What could be better than that?”

I noted that she referred to money as caps, rather than bits. I remember thinking it was strange to name money after headwear, but figured it was probably just a name. It wasn’t as if bits actually resembled mouth-bits, after all. And then there was the concerning repetition of the word “Wasteland”, which sounded more than a little ominous—and this coming from someling hatched in a place called the Badlands.

Despite the slight mental sidetrack, I kept up the conversation. “That sounds pretty good,” I said. It sounded pretty pony-like, too, and in a good way.

“Yeah, it’s great,” she said. “Best decision I ever made.” She reached over, picking up her long weapon. She ran a hoof gently along the long, lean frame. “Heck, I pretty much had to, after getting this. Seems a waste to only ever use her for hunting.”

I almost missed what she said. My hunger dug at my mind, almost frantic at the traces of love I could feel radiating from her. It was faint and weak, but at the time, it was the most amazing thing I had ever sensed. I fought back a fresh trembling. “That’s... very nice,” I said, struggling to keep my voice even. I was so hungry!

It was probably a good thing that Long Haul interrupted when he did, before I could do something reckless. “Alright y’all. Chow’s

ready!” Bowls clattered as he served out portions of a thick vegetable stew and passed them around. When he set a bowl before me, I gripped my medical box in my hooves and popped open the lid.

Sharps jerked so hard he almost spilled his own bowl, biting down on the bit of his rifle again, and I froze, the lid only barely open. “Woah, easy. I don’t have a weapon. I was just getting a ration to trade.” While Long Haul frowned at Sharps, I slowly opened the box the rest of the way to show the contents, then gingerly reached in to slide some of the rations aside. Having done so, I picked one up, passing it to Long Haul, who gave another smile and nod to me.

Eventually, Sharps relaxed, though he didn’t entirely relent. “What are those crystals?”

“They belonged to my mother,” I said, ears drooping.

“And that... device?”

Starlight spoke up before I could, her words slurred around a mouthful of stew. “Es uh dahah-hor.” Then she coughed and sputtered a moment before managing to swallow, thumping a hoof against her chest. “Oof... yeah, data-store. They plug into PipBucks and you can read stuff off them.”

“Or any terminal with a proper slot,” I added, picking up my bowl as I started to eat. I have to admit, Long Haul could cook. “It was my mother’s, too. She left a message on it for me.”

“What was it?” Starlight asked.

“I don’t know. It’s damaged.”

“Oh,” Starlight said, her enthusiasm curling up and dying.

“I might be able to fix it,” I said, and was rewarded by a hopeful smile. “I just need to find the right software tools, and I might be able to extract the data.”

Out of the corner of my eyes, I could see Sharps leveling a suspicious look over his bowl. I took another swig of my stew—we seemed to lack spoons—and added, “We had an old terminal at the farm, dug out of some ruined building, and a bunch of books on programming. I poked around at it a lot when I wasn’t reading. Got pretty good at it, I guess, but it didn’t have the tools I’d need to fix this.”

It was a weak excuse, but I hoped it would be enough to explain

my training in computer intrusion techniques. I also hoped that those techniques would be enough to help me retrieve whatever my Queen had left for me. I was already getting the impression that there were not many computer specialists left.

It worked well enough for Starlight, at least. “Cool! Hey, think my PipBuck would have what you need?”

“Maybe,” I said, my ears perking up. “Stable-Tec loads all sorts of features in those things.” I hastily added, “Or at least that old Stable-Tec manual said they did.”

She quickly gulped down the rest of her stew, setting the bowl aside, and scooted up next to me. “Just don’t break it, okay? These things are hard to replace!” Her tone was joking, but it struck me as that kind of joking one does to soften just how serious they really are about it. Considering that it was a two-hundred year old piece of advanced arcano-science computer tech, I couldn’t imagine these things were common. If there were still cities in ruin, I had some serious doubts about Equestria’s manufacturing capabilities.

She leaned in close as she shifted the PipBuck around so I could use it, and I immediately lost my train of thought. She was so close! If I could just coax out that feeling of love again, I could get a quick snack. “Thank you,” I said as I held the PipBuck in my hooves, practically leashing her in place thanks to that strap around her neck. As I began flipping through the various menus, I asked, “So, you said something about the most awesome gun in the Wasteland?”

“Oh yeah!” she said, and ducked her head to slip easily out from my imperfect leash. I mentally cursed as she moved away to retrieve her gun. “This beauty! It’s a Lancer, and it’s pretty much one-of-a-kind. It ain’t some old-world antique, either. No factories or nothing; just some old unicorn in Gemstone that made some of the best weapons in the world!”

It was quite graceful looking, for a weapon. It was twice as long as her and very narrow, with an open metal frame around a central, barrel-like core. The whole thing was painted dark brown, like wood. The only protrusions were the mouth-grip and telescopic sight near the midline of the weapon, and the bulge at the rear.

That faint sense of love flickered into being again. It taunted me, just out of reach.

"It doesn't fire very fast," Starlight said. "In fact, it can only fire once before I have to swap out crystals to charge. But Celestia above, one is all she needs! I could hit a galloping radhog a mile out with this thing. Hell, I've done it!"

"Right," Sharps muttered.

"Hey! I have!" She shot him a glare before turning back to me. "Don't mind Captain Grumpy-Pants over there. He's just jealous because I've got the cooler gun."

"Guns don't need to be cool," Sharps said in a weary tone. "They just have to do the job right."

"Uh-huh," Starlight said, smirking. "And how far away can you hit a pony with that hacked-together hunk of junk?"

I glanced to the gun in question. It seemed far less impressive when not staring down the muzzle. It looked as if someone had simply taken a pipe and welded on a bit, stock, and sights, stuck a magazine in the bottom of it, and hung a worn strap between the two ends. It looked crude, but functional.

Sharps shrugged, playing nonchalant, though I saw his jaw tighten. "A few hundred yards."

"Sounds like your gun sucks."

"And I can shoot a half-dozen ponies and make all their buddies scramble for cover in the time it takes you to get off a single shot. There's more to a gun than range."

"That sounds like the excuse of a pony that misses a lot."

"Children," Long Haul said, his voice cutting through the conversation despite remaining calm and conversational in tone. "Settle down, now. Y'all have your own merits, no need to make it a contest. Way I see it, we can use the diversity. Y'all with the automatics can put out enough firepower already. I figure having one piece with a bit more range and punch should complement that nicely, don't you?"

Thunderhead was nodding, his sole contribution to the conversation thus far. Sharps held out for a bit before finally sighing. "Yeah, fine."

Long Haul nodded, then looked to Starlight. "As for you, I get that

you like your gun. Heck, it's a mighty fine piece, I gotta say. I can see why you're proud of it. But don't you ever let me hear you insulting another pony's piece again. Critique, sure. But insulting it, to a pony like that? One who hangs their life on their gun? Way I figure it, you insult his piece, you might as well be insultin' his soul."

Starlight cringed back, eyes wide and ears drooped. "I-I didn't mean—"

"Now, now," Long Haul said, reaching out to pat her on the shoulder. "I know you didn't mean nothin' by it. Least, not like that. You're a good filly, even if you just don't think quite so much 'bout what you're sayin' at times." He drew back, returning to his playful smile. "And maybe tone down the braggin' a bit, okay?"

She weakly smiled back. "Okay."

He nodded, and we all returned to eating. I took quick sips of my stew as I browsed through the PipBuck. Eventually I sighed, holding it out to Starlight. "Thanks, but it looks like it doesn't have any of the tools I need."

"Aww," she said, frowning as she slipped the loop over her head. "Well, I guess it was worth a try."

"Of course," I said, smiling. "Thank you."

Her smile returned. "You're welcome."

The food was finished quickly. Tired from a long day of walking (Or, in my case, from my body's complete lack of endurance), the conversation died down pretty quickly. We were all ready to get some sleep. All but Sharps, who volunteered to take first watch. Apparently things were dangerous enough around there that we needed to keep an eye out even while we slept.

Bedrolls were laid out and ponies settled in for the night. Lacking any such supplies myself, I simply found a patch of dirt free of rocks and lay down, using my box as a makeshift and fairly uncomfortable pillow. I missed my chitin.

A minute later, a blanket hung in front of me. I looked up to see Thunderhead holding it by one edge. He dropped it in front of me. "Got an extra you can use."

I smiled. "Thank you."

“Mmmhmm,” he replied, giving a nod and a soft smile. Then he turned back to his bedroll and lay down.

I remember hoping that his barding was warm. He lied to me. He didn’t have an extra blanket.



I woke to the faint light of pre-dawn and the ache of my entire body protesting my own existence.

It was better than the previous night, but it would evidently take more than a single night’s rest to recover from two centuries of inactivity. I wanted to just lay there for a while, but I couldn’t help mentally grumbling that I had spent far too long doing nothing for the past two hundred years, thank you very much.

I had apparently moved past denying reality and on to being bitter about it.

Still, the irritation gave me enough motivation to finally push aside my borrowed blanket and get up.

Everypony was still asleep, except Silver, who was lying back against the side of one of the cattle a short distance away—the single-headed one, it turned out. She looked over as I rose, giving a silent nod that I returned.

I took the edge of the blanket in my teeth, dragging it back over to Thunderhead. The pre-dawn morning was chilly, but it didn’t seem to be bothering him any. He was sprawled out on his back, legs askew. Still, I pulled the blanket over him. He mumbled something in his sleep, curling up and immediately entangling himself in the blanket’s folds.

I slipped away from the sleeping ponies, making my way over to where Silver sat.

She smiled as I approached, her voice just above a whisper. “He likes you.”

“What?” I said, wincing as my voice came out louder than I meant. Quieting down, and casting a glance back to who I suspected she meant, I asked, “Who, Thunderhead?”

“Mmmhmm,” she said with a nod.

“I thought he was just being nice,” I said. I hadn’t sensed any partic-

ular affection from him. Then again, I wouldn't have off of such a brief encounter. There was quite a difference between liking someone based off a first impression and forming the kind of close connection that would produce affection I could feed on. "You sure?"

"Oh yeah," she said, laughing softly. "I think he said more to you last night than he has since leaving Mareford. Ain't like he's shy or nothin', he just doesn't seem to have much use for words. He's about as nice as they come, though."

I smiled as I glanced over to him again. He did seem like a pretty nice pony, from the little bit I'd seen of him. If he really did like me, I could culture a nice friendship out of it. Maybe even something more.

She chuckled softly at my smile, then patted the ground. "Go on, take a seat. Probably be a little bit before everypony's up, anyway. Wouldn't mind the company."

I accepted her offer and sat, though I groaned softly as I did so. My legs felt rubbery. Silver looked concerned. "I'm just feeling pretty sore from yesterday," I said. "I'm not used to traveling. I just hope I can keep up with everypony."

"Well, we tend to take regular breaks for the brahmin to graze," she said, gently placing a hoof on the head of what was apparently called a brahmin, now, because 'cattle' was so two centuries ago. "And heck, if you're feeling like you need more of a break, you can probably take a load off and ride for a while. Old Chuck here could use the company."

I had to ask. "Chuck?"

"Yep," she said, cracking a smile. "Odd name, I know. It's what Moorice named him; I think it was some sort of joke. He was Chuck's better half."

Silver nodded to the other side of Chuck, at the scarred tissue along one side of his off-center neck. "Moorice got a face-full of barbs from some mutated fly... *thing*. Poor thing got a nasty infection from the wounds, just started rotting him away from the inside. When he passed, we amputated the head. Old Chuck here may not have had much upstairs, but he's a tough one. Pulled through strong as ever." She smiled softly, giving him an affectionate rub between the ears. "He's kind of become our good-luck charm, I guess."

That was both somewhat charming and horrifically morbid. I hardly noted it, though. I was too preoccupied by the glorious sensation of love! Silver truly cared for Chuck. It wasn't the powerful love of a romantic relationship, or even the affection of a close friendship. It was more like the gentle love of a favorite pet; not nearly as filling, but it would suffice. I carefully slid in closer as she was distracted by the brahmin, hoping to pretend I was merely sitting closer to keep our conversation quiet.

I nearly trembled as I drew in the emotion. I couldn't draw it in very fast without getting uncomfortably close, but that was just fine with me; I wanted to be slow and gentle, so as to not alarm her. Even that little trickle of love was spectacular to my starved mind.

Sadly, it faded before I could get more than a little nibble, but I was content. I hadn't even drawn enough for a half a day's survival, but I would have many more opportunities. A little here, a little there, and I would be just fine. It just required a little bit of patience.

I covered for my closeness by reaching out to lightly run a hoof along Chuck's side. Silver smiled softly at that.

"Well I'll be," came Long Haul's quiet voice, as he stepped quietly over to us. "Somepony who gets up before I do. Now that's a pleasant change."

Silver broke into a wide grin. "You must be getting old," she teased, rising up to meet him. "Sleeping in so late, letting this wonderful day waste away while you're lazing about in bed." It was still mostly dark, and the dark clouds that filled most of the sky, scattered about in the most chaotic fashion, were anything but wonderful. At least it was still clear above us.

He chuckled as they both leaned in, nuzzling fondly. I'm normally loath to use insect metaphors, but I have to admit, the one about a moth being drawn to flame seemed particularly apt at that moment, especially when it would probably end just as poorly if I followed the instinct that welled up in me. The love I felt between them was intoxicating!

Eventually they parted, starting on morning routines. A fire was lit, and the cooking pot came out again. Meanwhile, faint wisps of love still lingered between them. I considered moving to be between

them, hoping to catch a little of that love between them. Sure, it would be inefficient, drawing only a tiny fraction of it, but even a little bit would have been wonderful. Despite that, I stayed put. A little patience would get me all I needed, without needing to act strange and drawing attention to myself.

Sadly, Long Haul turned down my offer to help with breakfast, shooting down my best excuse to be close to him. "It's a bit too simple to need much help with," he said, despite the appreciative smile. I'd have to wait just a little longer for my opportunity.

It wasn't long before the scent of cooking vegetables reached the noses of the sleeping ponies, and within minutes they had all woken. Food and water was passed around, bedrolls and blankets were packed, and a few discreet trips were made to an unfortunate dead bush a short distance away.

"It's still clear," Starlight said, in quiet wonderment, her eyes to the sky. Sure enough, the ring of clear sky still hung over us, the last few stars twinkling in the growing light. I pondered her reaction.

"Better dress warm, all the same," Sharps noted, tugging on the straps of his barding. "Those are some dark clouds we're heading towards. I wouldn't be surprised if it starts raining soon."

The statement seemed immediately strange to me. I spent enough time in Equestria to be used to weather happening on a precise schedule. There was never any question about whether it would rain or not on a certain day, unless some weather pony screwed up the schedule. Something seemed off to me, but I certainly wasn't going to speak up and highlight my own ignorance. Even as a recluse on an isolated farmstead, it would be hard to explain a misconception about the weather. I'd simply have to roll with it.

Starlight tore her gaze away from the sky to root around in her small saddlebags. She eventually pulled out a light jacket and put it on.

Sharps, who had supplemented his thick barding with a large poncho, simply stared at her for several seconds before giving a soft snort, shaking his head, and turning back to his packs.

He made no comment about my attire, as nonexistent as it was. I was tempted to ask Thunderhead if I could borrow that blanket again,

or a spare jacket, or *anything* in case it did rain. When I glanced his way, his look immediately changed my mind. I got the impression he was considering the exact same thing. I didn't need to ask. If it did start to rain, it would spur things on quite well if he were to "come to my rescue".

Soon the brahmin were up and ready to go, with Long Haul giving a few final tugs on the straps holding the bulging packs on. "Okay," he said, glancing back to us. "Looks like we're all set, and if we keep up the pace, we should make Rust by tomorrow night. Let's get this show on the road."



The tiny bit of love I had pilfered was just enough to keep me going. It pushed that ache in my limbs to the background. They were still sore, and still eager for some rest, but I was able to persevere.

That tiny bit of love probably saved my life.

By mid-day, we had passed under the edge of the cloud cover, following the train tracks as they wound through the broken, barren terrain. The dark clouds above continued to slowly churn and drift. They bunched up in places, stretching thin in others. Every now and then a thin crack would form, a spear of sunlight lancing through the gray dimness to light some small, distant piece of land before inevitably fading away once again.

There were no pegasi, I noted. It was as if the clouds were left to float aimlessly on their own. Was the weather really left entirely uncontrolled here? Sure, we were toward the edge of Equestria, but I thought it strange.

Contemplating the strange weather led me to an epiphany: I knew where I had seen that strange piece of debris near the C.L.T. facility. The curved white surface was just like those weather-control towers the Ministry of Awesome had been working on, and would explain what Starlight meant by a "tower" exploding. Had they actually gotten those online?

The tower's destruction made sense of what I was seeing above. If they'd been using it to keep the weather under control, its loss would

explain why things had ended up in chaos up above.

And yes, my hive knew what those towers were all about. They built almost 50 cloud-high spires at tremendous expense. Every single ministry was involved in them, in some part. It was the MAw's greatest secret. Of *course* we knew.

I was contemplating what—if anything—that information might mean for my situation when I was interrupted by a shockingly loud *SnapSnapSnap!*

The three sharp sounds were so close together that they were almost one. A couple puffs of dirt kicked up beside Thunderhead, who was walking just in front of me, and the stallion toppled forward. His chin and chest hit the dirt, hindquarters lifting up with his momentum before flopping to the side.

Sharps lunged forward past me, shouting. "Ambush right!" He bit down on the grip of his rifle, and everything became explosions.

I lurched back a step, ears pinning back against an assault of sound so loud I could feel it in my chest. I barely noticed the dark-blue blur of Starlight throwing herself off the path and into a narrow depression beside the tracks, and I followed, wincing as something hot smacked me on the cheek.

I collapsed on my side beside Starlight, covering my head with my forehooves. Sharp's rifle continued to fire in an unbroken string, each shot brutally loud.

Then the assault of sound ended. I pried a hoof away from my face to see Sharps reach up to his rifle, and the magazine fell away, spent. He shot a look over at us and shouted, his voice oddly small and distant. "Fucking shoot!"

Starlight yelped something as she scrambled up, her "Lancer" swinging around while Sharps pulled a fresh magazine from a pouch at his side. Another sharp snap sounded, and Starlight yelped again, ducking down below the edge of the depression once again. Sharps merely flinched, but didn't stop. He slammed the magazine into the bottom of the weapon, pulled back the handle protruding from the weapon's side, and fired again.

This time I put my hooves over my ears, muffling the powerful

sound. Sharps paced his shots, firing short bursts as he advanced up onto the rise we were hiding behind. Starlight, as if encouraged by his firing, poked up again. Another pair of sharp cracks made her flinch, but she stayed up.

The brahmin we had been beside—the one with both heads—staggered along the far side of the tracks, stumbled, and collapsed. Thunderhead hadn't moved at all, lying still atop the tracks.

A strange, hissing snap sounded, and Starlight ducked down again. "Shit!" she cried out as her magic practically tore open the chamber at the rear of her rifle. She pulled out a dull red crystal, quickly replacing it with a glowing one, and sealed it up again. Then she rose up once more.

The flicker of flame caught my attention. I watched in stunned fascination as a pinwheel of fire silently arced through the air, fixed to the neck of a bottle. It came down to shatter against Chuck's side, fire bursting forth and flowing across Long Haul and Silver.

Several sharp snaps made me wince, and dirt sprayed over me as Sharps fell back into the depression with a mangled curse, limbs flailing. Starlight shrieked something, wavering, but resumed her aim, snapping off another shot. Then she ducked down, reloading again.

Sharps had managed to haul himself into a sitting position, though his left foreleg was held close to his side, injured. He fumbled for a moment to get a good grip on the bit of his rifle and brought it up again, emptying the rest of the magazine in a brief string of hammering shots. One of his casings landed on my side; I yelped at the searing pain, kicking it away.

I couldn't see Long Haul and Silver. The depression they had been in was smokey and smoldering. I hoped they had gotten out. Across the tracks, Chuck was lowing and galloping awkwardly away, his packs burning.

Only having one good foreleg slowed Sharps's reload. He had just slammed a new magazine home when there was a soft *thunk*, and a spear appeared, buried in his neck so deeply that the tip jutted out of his back.

The stallion's eyes went wide, his rifle falling to the ground. I stared in horror.

For some reason, the thought my mind decided to focus on was:

shouldn't there be more blood?

I looked to Starlight in time to see her fire off another shot, another whining hiss and snap sounding as her weapon loosed a red beam of light, searing a line in my vision. As she reloaded, I realized that she was the only one still in the fight. The only one between me and whoever was out there, trying to kill us all!

My eyes fell to Sharps's rifle. I lunged forward, grabbing the bit in my teeth, and ignoring the grit of dirt as I scrambled back into cover. Taking just a moment to steady myself, I took a deep breath, then raised up, leveled the rifle up the rocky slope in the same direction Sharps had been firing—I didn't actually see anypony at the moment—and tongued the trigger.

Nothing happened. There wasn't even a click.

With a distressed whimper, I dropped back down behind cover, dropping the rifle into my hooves. It *should* work. I'd just seen Sharps reload it before he went down. I played back watching him load the first time. I pushed on the magazine to make sure it was in all the way, and then grabbed the handle on the side, pulling it back. The breach opened, and the handle locked back. I pushed and jiggled it, trying to get it to shut and chamber a round, but it wouldn't move.

I heard a distant yell, and in desperation, I lifted the rifle to try again, hoping the weapon was working as intended. As I rose up, I saw the movement of a pony coming down the slope. I don't remember any details about them in that frantic moment. I think it was a mare, and she might have had something in her mouth. She must have seen me rising up, as she turned and dove for a large rock. I tongued the trigger again, and the rifle roared.

It also slammed back against me, nearly pulling free of my mouth and bashing the stock against my shoulder and neck. I have no idea where my shots went. Honestly, I was probably lucky I didn't hit Starlight.

I slumped back, getting a good grip on the bit again. When I rose up this time, I cinched the semicircular base of the stock snug against my shoulder and the base of my neck. I squeezed the trigger again, and the thundering crack of the shot drove the rifle squarely into my body,

but this time, I kept it under control. A spattering of dirt puffs kicked up all around the rock the pony had hidden behind, even knocking off a few shards of stone.

Another searing flash of light dazzled my vision, and I dropped back down again, blinking. A glance back showed that Sharps had pulled free the spear—*there's blood, now*, I noted—and had collapsed on his side. He was weakly fumbling at a pouch on his chest. I, however, had focused on another pouch, the one that held more magazines for his rifle. I felt I was going to need it, very soon.

I scrambled out again, snatching the pouch and pulling against its strap. Sharps even relented in his own efforts, lifting his foreleg to let me pull the strap free before returning to his fumbling.

I threw the strap around my neck, the pouch thumping against my medical box. I could hear more yelling. *Lots* of yelling.

I took one look back to the fallen brahmin, just past the tracks. I didn't even think before I was on my hooves, running as fast as my weary legs could carry me. I dove over the fallen animal a moment before several sharp snaps sounded, all around me.

After only a moment to take a breath, I rose up, just barely exposing my head as I laid the barrel of the rifle across one of the brahmin's packs, sighted in on a cloud of dust drifting down the slope, and fired a long burst. Dirt kicked up all around the slope, leaving the ridge in a dusty haze.

The rifle lurched with the final shot, the bolt slamming shut. I dropped behind the brahmin, releasing the bit and quickly pulling back on the handle once again. When it locked back, I saw that there were no more bullets in the magazine. This was followed by a few frantic seconds as I scrambled to find the release, which ended up being a small lever just behind the magazine. Pulling the empty magazine free, I fished out a new one—I didn't even see how many I had, just that there were more—and fumbled with it for a moment before finally sliding it into place.

I took up my firing position again, only to see Starlight, her Lancer's chamber sitting open and spent as a pony leaped over the edge of the depression she lay in. Of all the odd bits and pieces that adorned the

pony, the only thing that caught my eye was the machete clenched in her teeth.

I swung around the rifle, but it was too late. The mare came down on Starlight, the blade slicing at her head.

There was a flash of sparks as Starlight instinctively raised her rifle to protect herself, the other mare's blade cutting into the weapon. Then the other pony crashed down into her, sending them into a tumble, obscured by the slight rise of the train tracks.

Movement on the slope caught my attention again. At least two more ponies were running toward us, one of which held a spear in his teeth, with several more on his back. I sighted in on him and tongued the trigger, blasting out several shots. Both ponies dropped behind cover once again.

A rapid series of sharp discharges sounded from just across the tracks, and Starlight scrambled back, her pistol floating just in front of her, firing frantically. Blue lines of light struck out. With the rise of the tracks obscuring my sight, all I could see of the other pony was a leg that spasmed up into view, which promptly burned away into a cloud of blue particles. Starlight's pistol jerked several more times, no longer firing.

I caught a glimpse of movement up on the slope above, and immediately squeezed off another burst; Starlight winced and dropped behind cover again. Sharps, I noted, was no longer moving.

Letting go of the bit, I shouted out. "Starlight! We have to go!"

Now, I'm sure some of you wonder why I didn't just leave her. After all, I had just met these ponies the previous evening. They were nothing more than food to me, at the time. Heck, I could drop my disguise and fly off.

I'd like to say that it was a carefully measured decision of logic. I was in the middle of nowhere, more than a day's travel on hoof from the nearest settlement, dangerously low on love, and physically exhausted. If Rust didn't lie on the tracks we'd been traveling along, I might completely miss it, assuming I could even make it there. I needed guidance, I needed assistance, and I needed food; Starlight could give me all of those.

But that wasn't my reason. The simple fact is, I didn't even think of it.

I was so preoccupied with the hellish chaos all around me that I wasn't thinking in terms of logic and reason. I was lost to emotional response. Two of them, actually.

The first, terrified of the terrible and abrupt violence of the previous minute, was screaming at me to run away.

The second, possessive and protective, insisted that these ponies were *mine*.

I suppose it was that "valued livestock" thing I mentioned earlier. Yes, I had just met them, and yes, I was probably going to part ways with them upon arriving in civilization, but that would be done on *my* terms. These ponies had value to me. I *liked* these ponies. I didn't like seeing ponies get hurt, much less when they were ponies I *liked*. These other ponies were hurting my ponies. They were *killing* my ponies. They were taking from me, and I didn't like it. I hated it. I was terrified of it.

The emotions combined, dragging me along to flee with any ponies I could salvage.

Starlight stared at me with wide eyes, and I beckoned to her. She glanced over to Sharps, trembling for a moment before snatching up her bent rifle and galloping toward me.

I saw the puff of dust near the top of the ridge an instant before another snap hammered at my ears, and tongued the trigger to send another burst his way. Dirt kicked up, clustered loosely around where the shot had come from.

Starlight collapsed at my side, panting and trembling, but intact.

I cast a quick glance backwards, hoping the glimpse I had caught during my dive across the brahmin had been correct. It was; just ten yards away was a shallow gully, just deep enough to conceal a galloping pony. I pointed a hoof, shouting at the top of my lungs over the muffled buzz in my ears. "Go!"

Then I turned back and fired again. The rifle blared twice more and fell silent, its magazine spent.

I dropped down and turned, to find Starlight still laying beside me.

“Go!” I repeated, and hooked a leg under her shoulder to haul her up. I half-dragged her along until she finally got the idea and got her hooves under her, and together we dove for the gully.

A burst of snaps sounded all around me, puffs of dust kicking up from the far side of the gully. Then we fell, collapsing into the dried streambed.

I panted, my heart hammering in my ears, clear even past the buzzing. Starlight was staring straight up, eyes wide and glistening as she trembled. She suddenly blurted out, “Fuck!”

Keep going, my mind insisted, and I obeyed. I hauled myself up despite my fatigue. “Are you okay?” I asked as I kicked out the spent magazine. Retrieving a fresh one—the second from last—I slammed it home.

“I... y-yeah,” she stammered, patting herself with her hooves a couple times. “I-I’m okay. I’m okay.” She pushed herself up, shaking. “Uh... you?”

“I don’t think I’m injured,” I replied, my words sounding mushy to my ears. I pulled back the rifle’s handle, gripped the bit again, and peeked over the edge of the gully.

More shots sounded, but they were quieter; distant, echoing pops, not the brutally sharp snaps and cracks from before. I saw a few ponies, clad in patchy, cobbled-together barding. They were galloping, but not toward us. Instead, they were chasing after the flaming, lumbering bulk of Chuck.

I dropped back, silently hoping that he would give them a good, long chase. “We’ve got to run,” I said, pointing away from where the other ponies were headed. “Down the gully. Go.”

Starlight struggled to her hooves, looking dazed for a moment as my words processed. “R-right,” she said, staggering for a few moments before working up to a canter. I could see tears trickling down her cheek.

Slowly, the rush of adrenaline faded. The jittery tremble stilled, and a tremendous fatigue crashed down on me. After only a couple minutes, our canter slowed to a trot, then a walk. Not much later, I started to stumble, unable to lift my hooves enough to clear the occasional bump in the dirt.. We’d just left the gully when I fell. Starlight cried

out, stumbling back to me. “W-Whisper! C-come on!”

I tried to push myself up. If not for Starlight’s magic, I wouldn’t have been able to. I panted. I couldn’t even hold my head up as I staggered another step.

“Come on, Whisper!” she cried out, voice wavering as more tears flowed. “W-we have to keep going!”

“I... I can’t,” I weakly murmured, staggering again. Only her magic kept me from falling. My body, atrophied by centuries of inactivity and pushed to the extremes by adrenaline, was failing.

“No,” she whimpered, coming close against my side. “No, no, no! Were you hit?”

I swallowed, shaking my head. My leg tried to give out, and I ended up leaning heavily against Starlight’s side. “No... muscles... giving out...”

She pulled with her magic, staggering forward. Even as light as I was, it seemed a tremendous strain on her. I pressed on, my abused body feeling numb and heavy and sick.

I pushed away, stumbling another step before collapsing to the ground and vomiting. For the second time in as many days, I lay there, gut burning as I retched. Starlight dropped to my side, crying as she tugged with her magic “Whisper! Whisper, come on, w-we can’t stop. They... they’ll...”

I coughed and spit. Somehow, with the help of her magic lifting me, I got my hooves under me. I almost fell as my stomach clenched again, sending agonizing stabs through my abdomen, and I spit up a bit of bile. “Please,” Starlight cried. “Please, come on! Please... don’t...”

I wavered as I made one more step. I was suddenly completely preoccupied by the fact that I had dropped the rifle somewhere. I almost fell when I looked back, and Starlight gave another tug with her magic, her shoulder pressing firmly against my side. I felt a dull sense of relief when I noticed the rifle floating along beside her.

Then I stumbled again, almost knocking Starlight down.

My words came out slurred and muffled. “I... can’t...”

Starlight shuddered with a quiet sob. “Please.”

“...Hide,” I mumbled. “There.”

She turned to where I was looking; a few large rocks just a hundred yards away, a few of many that dotted the landscape, and nestled in the crook of a tiny ravine. It was small and inconspicuous, and a pony would have to walk right on top of us to find us hiding there.

She pulled with her magic, pressing her shoulder against my side, and we slowly limped our way over.

We collapsed in exhaustion in the tiny hiding place, sprawling haphazardly against each other. For a few moments, we lay there, trembling and panting with exhaustion. My body was *done*. Then Starlight's breathing hitched, she shuddered, and finally rolled against me, hooves grabbing at me as she cried into my chest. I forced a barely-responsive foreleg to lift up and drape across her shoulder as she clung tight, muffling her anguish with my body. I caught myself starting to sob, and struggled to keep myself under control. Tears flowed down my cheek as I clung weakly to her.

I didn't understand what had just happened. It wasn't just chaotic; it was *wrong*. This wasn't some minor scuffle, or even a battle. It was ponies—*ponies!*—ambushing other ponies, for... for what? The merchant's wares?

I didn't understand, and that, more than anything else, *terrified* me. I had come horrifyingly close to dying, and I didn't understand why. If I didn't understand why, I couldn't take action to avoid it. If I didn't understand why, I was helpless against whatever cause had nearly killed me. All my life, all my training, all my experience, relied on understanding how ponies thought, but I could not understand the motivation for what had just happened.

If I was going to survive for long, I was going to need to learn, and learn fast.

But that was long-term.

Short-term, I was in bad shape, too. I was beyond exhaustion. Everything hurt. I could hardly lift a hoof to defend myself. My ears were filled with a strange buzzing, and everything felt lopsided. I was still terribly low on magic and lost in the middle of a barren and empty land.

The one thing I did have, however, was a *pony*.

I didn't want to hurt her.

I kept a hoof gently on the back of her shoulder as I focused a little bit of magic. Crying into my chest, she didn't notice the flash of green above as a horn sprouted from my forehead.

I didn't want to hurt her, so I took my time crafting the spell that followed. When I released the bolt, Starlight didn't jerk at all. She just slowly went slack, relaxing against me as she lost consciousness.

My own vision wavered, my head growing even heavier as everything skewed and wobbled. The tiny effort I had given was exhausting, and for a moment I feared I would fall unconscious before I could act, but I clung on.

Then I pulled. This wasn't the gentle, subtle feeding that comes from drawing on the love a pony feels toward something. Those feelings are at the front of their mind, drawing the energy out toward the object of their affection and leaving it exposed and vulnerable, easy to feast upon.

No, this was reaching deep inside of her, into the depths of her mind, and tearing out the love within.

She tensed, giving a little gasp and fidgeting in her sleep. Moments later she gave a weak, strangled cry, her legs kicking out.

I fed, and as the strength flowed into me, I tightened my grip. I held her head tight against my chest, muffling the whimpers and cries of anguish, her limbs weakly struggling against me. I could only imagine the horrible dreams that flooded her mind as I ripped the love and happiness from her.

I didn't want to hurt her, but I did.

Chapter Three

Downpour

Some ponies seem to have strange misconceptions about changelings.

We feed on love, yes. To do so, we have to turn to other species, impersonating them as we secretly feast. We need to do this in order to live. So, while it is completely wrong, I can at least comprehend how some ponies think changelings can not feel love.

We can. We are not emotional cripples or mindless drones. We have likes and dislikes. We have friends. We have close personal bonds to those we like. We love.

What we don't do is generate magic.

There is great magic to love and friendship. Ponies know that—or at least, they did once. When a pony loves, there is magic there. I don't know why we're different. I'm not a biologist, or a thaumatologist, or whatever kind of -ologist I would need to be to really understand the *why* of it. All I know is that we can feed on those emotions, and in doing so, we consume the magic that is tied up within those emotions. We can even draw on another changeling's store of magic by feeding upon their emotions, though it's considered vile to do so without their consent.

My point is, we are not heartless monsters. That's not to say we're saints that can do no wrong; I'm certainly not skilled enough of an Infiltrator to pass off a lie like that, especially with the example some changelings have made. No, there are changelings who are every bit as cruel and vile as the worst ponies, but there are also those who are as kind and generous as the nicest pony.

Our situation has placed our species in conflict, but we're not so fundamentally different as some would assume.

That knowledge has come as a terrifying revelation to many in the past, and I'm sure it will continue to plague the thoughts of others in the future. Some even find it so terrible that they refuse to accept it, no matter how plainly it's staring them in the face. After all, It's easier to see the world in black and white. It's much harder to find yourself in

conflict with a people you find you can empathize with.

I mention all this because I want you to understand how much I disliked seeing Starlight suffer, twitching and whimpering as she slept, and why I stayed with her, gently stroking a hoof over her mane as she trembled at my side, her rest punctuated by the occasional weak cry.

I liked her. I don't mean as some serious attraction or anything. I don't know if I'd even consider us to be casual friends. All the same, I found her to be generally nice and friendly, which had earned her a favorable opinion in my mind. And so, I disliked the pain I had inflicted on her, despite how necessary and correct it had been to do so.

Physically, I felt better than I had since before my long sleep. My muscles still felt faintly sore, but it had receded to a simple background sensation, soothed by the love I had consumed. It was no longer the crippling loss of strength I had been experiencing. Much of the love I had taken had already been burned up by my body, spent repairing whatever damage I had caused from my overexertion, but there was still a comfortable reserve. It was enough that I didn't have to be quite so conservative with my magic.

A quick change had pushed a bit of that surplus toward improving my body, strengthening joints and muscles to something a little more appropriate for an earth pony. It was nothing major, nothing more than could be expected of a lean earth pony who had spent her life reading books instead of working, but I no longer felt dangerously frail. The improved muscles could hold up to the strain of traveling much better than they had before.

Despite my minor windfall, I did exercise some measure of rationing. I held only a modest amount of love, and Starlight wouldn't be good feeding until she had recovered. So long as I was careful and kept her in good health, starvation was no longer an imminent risk.

Well, starving from lack of love. Starving from lack of *physical* food was a little closer. Despite having several days of rations, I had no source of further food until we got to civilization. I doubted the edibility of the few dead or dying bits of brush we had seen. A lack of water was more concerning. I hadn't rooted around in Starlight's packs, but if she had no water on her, we needed to find some.

Maybe we'd get lucky, and the dark clouds above would start raining. I quietly cursed the lazy pegasi for no longer keeping weather to a neat schedule, like it should be.

I considered Starlight as she slept. She was young, barely into adulthood. As a unicorn, her lean frame was hardly surprising, but it wasn't the stereotypical skinny of a bookish mare, or the slender grace of a model. She had the kind of athletic build I normally associated with pegasi.

The mane I was stroking was silver, like my own assumed form. Unlike my mane, hers was cropped fairly short, giving it a somewhat spiky appearance when it stood up from her head. She was in good health, with no apparent injuries, and only a little scuffed up and dusty from the hellish encounter we had escaped. Other than that, she was quite well-groomed. Her cutie mark, looking like a falling star or comet, was a mystery to me.

Mostly, though, I was concerned about her mental state. The change from enthusiastic and boisterous to sobbing into my chest had been sharp, and I worried that those other ponies had inflicted some irreparable harm upon her, even if she had escaped their blades and bullets.

I had put additional strain on her through my feeding, though not without reason. She could heal this injury, but if I had not fed on her, I'm certain I would have died.

I'd do my best to aid her, of course. "Valued livestock" means I tend to the ponies I feed upon, and I still had some hope of building some sort of longer-term relationship that could sustain me without such a drastic invasion.

Setting that aside for the moment, I reluctantly considered a new resource I had acquired: Sharps's rifle. I have to admit, despite its contribution toward my survival, I disliked the device by its nature. It was large, extremely unsubtle, and spoke of a profound failure in finding less direct methods of achieving one's goals. Still, it *had* saved my life. If there were more ponies out there like the ones we had come across—a thought that still terrified me!—it may well save my life again. For the moment, I considered it an unfortunately useful survival tool,

and as such, I needed to understand it.

I picked it up, releasing and removing the magazine. Setting it aside for the moment, I examined the weapon. Even without the magazine, the handle and bolt refused to move. I held it in one hoof as I depressed the trigger, which released the bolt, and I slid it forward to rest on the empty chamber. Surprisingly, the weapon producing a distinct “click” as it came to rest, which I guessed must have been the firing pin. That seemed strange to me, seeing as I was no longer holding the trigger.

A little more examination turned up a safety, which I engaged. The sights were simple metal posts sticking up from the side of the barrel, and the stock was a heavy piece of wood with a semi-circular base wrapped in rugged cloth. Otherwise, there wasn’t much to the weapon. It was extremely simple, and fairly heavy. I hoped that meant “rugged” rather than “cheap”.

Setting down the rifle, I retrieved the magazine and started removing rounds. The chunky box held eighteen of the things, and they looked as crude and basic as the rifle itself. The stubby bullets were large, heavy, round-nosed things, and were seated in a case that was not the usual brass I had seen before, but appeared to be thick, welded steel. I didn’t really know enough about firearms to know if that was significant, just that it seemed unusual.

I reloaded the magazine, and slid it back into the weapon. I only had two magazines, for thirty-six shots. I’d spent as many rounds escaping from those other ponies. I found it extremely strange to be in a situation where I wondered if thirty-six bullets would be enough.

It occurred to me then that I had tried to kill a pony. And I do mean “tried”, as I’m reasonably certain that I hadn’t actually hit any of the ponies I had shot at, barring some freakish stroke of luck. But still, I had pulled that trigger fully intending to end the life of a pony.

It was a topic that I had considered before, during the long, idle times I had spent in Appleloosa. Other, more experienced Infiltrators were occasionally given missions that required more direct action, and that sometimes would include the “neutralization” of a pony whose actions impeded the goals of our hive. Being an assassin did have a certain air of power and prestige to it, so it wasn’t surprising that many

Infiltrators idly pondered what their life would be like if they were to receive the order to end a pony's life.

And honestly, most of the very few ponies our hive targeted were the kind of scum it would be hard to feel sorry for. Ponies who helped drive their own nation into darkness for their own ambitions. I've come back to the subject many times as I thought things over, and every time, I've come to the conclusion that what we did was right.

Fact is, if we'd been a bit more aggressive in our actions, it's possible the megaspells would have never happened.

So I didn't feel any sort of horrid shock or revulsion at my own actions. I was not troubled that I had tried to end the lives of those ponies. They had tried to kill me, and it was rational and reasonable to use whatever means were necessary to prevent that from happening. It was merely something to contemplate, an unexpected first for me, and one that led me to further contemplate my future.

The only thing that bothered me about it was in not understanding the motivations behind the ponies that attacked us. They had risked and lost the lives of at least one of their own to achieve a goal I did not understand. It seemed unlikely to me that the contents of that tiny caravan could be worth so much.

I was wrestling with the task of understanding their mysterious motivations when a shadow swept over me. I jerked with surprise, hooves clutching at my rifle as my gaze snapped upward. I caught the last flicker of feathers passing by, and a cold chill shot through me. Did those ponies have a pegasus out searching for us?

My surprised movement was enough to finally wake Starlight. She jerked as well, giving a whimpered cry before snapping awake, blinking at me. She continued to blink for a couple seconds, her breathing fast and panicked as she took in the situation. "W-Whisper?"

"It's okay," I said, stroking her mane again. "We're safe."

"Oh," she said, relaxing slightly. Her gaze drifted off, her eyes dull. "Okay."

"But we need to get going," I said. "I don't want to stick around here. We need to get somewhere safer." I didn't want to mention the pegasus. We'd be much more visible in the open, but we didn't have

the option of waiting, and I worried that mentioning it would only scare her.

She wavered a moment, looking around. "Yeah. I guess we should go." She rose to her hooves, her movements mechanical, and wavered slightly. She blinked several times, groggy and lost.

I stood as well, moving close to her side. "Should we go to Rust, then?"

"Yeah," she dryly intoned, looking down to her PipBuck. She stared for several seconds, her ears slowly drooping.

"We'll be okay," I said, placing a hoof gently on her shoulder, but she cringed and pulled away, her ears drooping further, her tail between her legs.

So I changed tactics. I made a show of taking a deep and unsteady breath. I blinked several times, conjuring up the saddest thoughts I could find; an easy task, given the previous day's worth of activities. Then I swallowed, speaking slowly and haltingly. "Thank you. For... for saving me."

Starlight looked up, meeting my eyes, but her expression held a flicker of confusion before fading away. "I didn't save you," she said, eyes sinking down again. "I almost got killed. You saved me."

"No I didn't," I said, shuffling a hoof to add to my visual discomfort. "I just yelled. You fought off that other pony and got away on your own. I couldn't even keep up, but you stayed behind." I swallowed, a few tears starting to run down my cheek as I blinked some more. "You could have kept running, but you stayed for me. You dragged me to cover. If you didn't, they could have seen me. They could have killed me."

I gave a teary smile, my voice choking slightly as I added, "Thank you."

She looked up to me again. The corners of her mouth trembled upward; a weak smile, but still a smile. It faded again a moment later. "I just..." She swallowed, blinking as her eyes watered up again. "I didn't want to be alone again."

I took that as a cue to step in and wrap her in a hug, and she returned it. "Well, you're not alone," I said. "I'll stick right there with you. Together. We can do this."

She pulled away again, but that time it was gentle. "Yeah," she said, wiping at her eyes. "Yeah, we can do this."

I smiled as I watched her getting her hooves under her again, and wiped away my own tears. “All right. So... which way do we go?”

She nodded, horn lighting as she lifted her PipBuck. “Rust is the closest town, and it’s that way.” She pointed roughly in the direction we had come from. “I don’t think we should go straight that way.”

“Good thinking,” I said, though it was pretty obvious. Meanwhile, Starlight turned back and forth, still looking at the screen.

“If we go that way,” she said, pointing again, off to the right of where Rust lay, “we can go through some rougher terrain. It’ll be a little slower, but... well, it’ll give us plenty of places to hide.”

“Sounds good,” I said, nodding encouragingly. “Lead the way, I guess.”

She paused to eye me. “Are you sure you’re up for this? You’re feeling better?”

“Yeah. I think the rest did me a lot of good.”

“Right,” she said, nodding, and we set off, eyes darting about for threats.

She did have water, it turns out, though only a single bottle. We each took a sip, saving the rest for later.

As she tucked it away in her saddlebags again, I decided it was time for me to peel away some of my ignorance.

“So. I lived on a farm all my life, and I really have no idea what’s going on out here.” I wasn’t entirely comfortable asking the question that followed, given her mental state, but I had to ask. “Do you have any idea who those other ponies were?”

I was surprised how hard Starlight’s voice was when she replied. “Raiders.”

“And... who are raiders?”

“They’re evil,” Starlight said. “They like hurting and killing and mutilating other ponies because they think it’s fun. They’re monsters, and I’m *glad* I killed her.”

I reeled at the thought of that. I knew of some scummy ponies, thanks to my work, but enjoying murder? *Mutilating*? I hoped that Starlight’s assessment was borne out of grief or bias. The alternative was horrifying. You might find a rare pony with such vile interests if

you looked in the recesses of Equestrian history; great, vilified figures that tainted the world with their darkness before being defeated, often by the princesses themselves. But to have so many working together as to have a name, an entire *category* of pony turned to the worst extents of depravity?

Her steps slowed slightly. "I've never killed a pony, before," she said, her words quiet.

"You did the right thing."

"I know," she said, her pace resuming. "It's just... I don't know. Strange. Like, I'm glad that I killed her, but I feel like I shouldn't be." She looked to me. "Does that sound normal?"

"You killed a pony, and you're worried about whether it was the right thing and how you're feeling about it," I said. "That seems pretty normal to me. Maybe better than normal. You did the right thing, and you *should* feel good about that."

"I guess." She went quiet as we continued to walk. We crossed the railroad tracks we had walked along earlier in the day, a mile or so from where we had been ambushed. I kept glancing toward the sky for the pegasus I had glimpsed earlier. Starlight had stopped looking around, merely watching where her hooves were stepping. Despite my nervousness, I didn't want to leave her in silence, and I still had a lot to learn.

"So, I don't really know much about the world, except what I read in a bunch of two-hundred-year-old books. What's the world really like, now?"

"Eh." She shrugged a little, then gestured to the side with her snout. "It's pretty much all like this."

I looked around at the barren dirt and rock, with barely a hint of dead vegetation. "But this place was always a desert," I said. "The old books I was reading talked about all sorts of other places. Forests, for example."

"Oh, yeah." She gave a half-hearted nod, though her attention at least lifted from her hooves. "I guess I've heard stories. There's some forests to the north, but I heard they're full of poisonous plants and monsters mutated by radiation. And I guess there's the swamps out to

the east, near Baltimore. That place is supposed to be really bad.”

“I see,” I said, although I wasn’t sure I did. “What happened?”

“Megaspells,” she replied, as if that said everything.

“But there are still ponies. Surely it can’t be bad everywhere?”

“Oh, there are less-bad places,” she said. “I mean, most of the world is just barren. Just avoid any place that’s radioactive.” She frowned. “Or that has nasty wildlife. Or raiders. Or is poisonous. Or has collapsing ruins.” She sighed, kicking a rock. “Most of the world sucks.”

I was finding this less and less encouraging. I had expected more recovery after such a long time. “But ponies survived.”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding faintly. “Well, those that were in the Stables. I guess everypony else died.” I hoped she was wrong; I wasn’t sure how accurate her knowledge of such old history truly was, but that was worse than our most severe predictions. “Well, plenty of the ponies in Stables died, too. I heard a bunch of them turned into death traps. Still, enough of them worked. Pretty much every pony you’ll find is here only because their ancestors lived in a Stable. Even the fucking raiders.”

I was done with learning about history for the evening.



We continued on, mostly in silence. The rugged terrain made our passage a bit slower, but we weren’t held back waiting on heavily laden brahmin. We made good progress, winding our way through ravines and valleys.

“We should find a place to spend the night,” Starlight said some time later, looking at the screen of her PipBuck. “It’ll be getting dark in an hour.”

“Shelter would be good,” I said, looking up. “I expect it’ll rain, soon.”

She nodded. “Looks like there used to be some mine just a couple miles thataway, with another small compound near the tracks. There might be some buildings we could hide out in.”

“Lead the way,” I said with a smile. She weakly echoed the expression, though it still looked strained.

Half an hour later, we caught sight of buildings ahead, across a shallow valley. After two hundred years, it wasn’t much to look at. There

were some water towers, one of which still stood, a half-collapsed coal tower, a long loading structure that had long since fallen onto the tracks it was meant to serve, and the skeletal remains of a warehouse. A short distance further up the slope were the burned-out remains of what had possibly been an office, and a dilapidated building that looked to have been the workers' barracks. Separate from those were a pair of outhouses that shared the dubious distinction of being the most intact-looking structures of the lot.

Our destination in sight, we made our way toward the barracks. We were halfway up the slope to the barracks when the sound of wood smacking against wood came from ahead of us. We halted, both instinctively shrinking down toward the ground.

In the following silence, we could hear the dry earth crunching under hooves.

As quietly as I could, I unslung my rifle, biting down on the bit. Starlight followed suit, pulling out her pistol, all gleaming metal and faintly glowing blue gems. Then we went still again, waiting.

The sound of hoofsteps on the dry earth slowly grew louder, walking roughly in line with the ridge of the slope we were approaching.

A head came over the ridge, some twenty yards away. It was a unicorn, and one of those slender, graceful, model-like types, at that. Her coat was purple, and she sported a long horn, with a flowing mane of dark blue and violet that blew lightly in the breeze. I was just noticing that I didn't feel a breeze when she shuffled her wings—and I locked up.

An alicorn. I was looking at an alicorn. It wasn't one of the princesses—the color was wrong—but there was no doubt that it was, truly, an alicorn.

Starlight cringed back, brushing against me, and froze again.

The alicorn walked on, seemingly oblivious to our presence. Then she stopped, turned her head, and stared straight at the pair of us, blinking.

I flinched back. If I hadn't forgotten to disengage the safety on my rifle, I would have shot at her. I worry over what could have happened to me if I had.

For several seconds we stared at each other in silence. We trembled,

while she continued to stare, blinking, impassive in her expression.

Her ear flicked, darting one way, then moments later turning another. She broke her gaze—Starlight and I both giving a nearly silent exhale—and turned her eyes upward. A moment later, I caught the sound that had drawn her attention: the faint pattering of the occasional raindrop.

Without a word, or even a glance back our way, the alicorn turned and walked off toward the barracks.

The moment she was out of sight, Starlight leaped up, giving me a tug as she scrambled back down the slope. I didn't argue, having no desire to be going *toward* some strange alicorn. We hurried back down to the railyard as the darkness spread. I could see the curtain of rain sweeping toward us.

The rain hit like a wave. In the span of seconds, the occasional droplet of water turned into a solid sheet of rain, soaking us through. Visibility dropped so sharply that I could hardly see the cluster of ruined structures we were heading toward, not even a hundred yards away. Water rapidly pooled around our hooves, and we splashed through swiftly forming puddles as we made our way to the closest thing to cover: the partially collapsed coal tower.

A flash of light lit up our surroundings, followed almost instantly by a bone-rattling BOOM of thunder.

We reached the coal tower and stumbled into the darkness, panting and dripping. Starlight eventually got the light of her PipBuck on, letting us see the inside of the ruin we found ourselves in. The hopper of the coal tower had ruptured as it collapsed, its remaining coal forming a large mound while the body of the hopper shielded us. The rain hammered relentlessly at the metal above our heads, turning our sanctuary into a giant metal drum, punctuated by the occasional boom and rumble of thunder. The inside was filthy, but at least it was dry.

After a moment to catch her breath, Starlight looked back. "Do you think it followed us?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the pounding of the rain.

I shook my head, moving closer so we could speak easily. "She was walking away," I said. "I've never seen an alicorn before."

She shuddered and shook her head. “Me neither, but... I heard stories, from up north. They’re not ponies. Not like normal ponies, anyway. They’re like the worst of raiders and slavers, only—”

“Wait,” I said, holding up a hoof. “Slavers? As in, taking slaves?”

“Well... yeah? Why else would they be called slavers?”

I have to admit that it had been a pretty stupid question. To be fair, I had asked it not because I couldn’t work out the meaning of the word but because it seemed so utterly bizarre to me. Ponies didn’t take slaves. Well, they took prisoners, and they would rarely make use of those prisoners in somewhat questionable ways, but I didn’t consider that the same thing, because...

I shook my head. “Right. Anyway, you were saying?”

“Uh... yeah, just, from what I heard, they’re like the worst of raiders and slavers, only they’re super-powerful and basically impossible to kill. Sometimes they foalnap ponies, sometimes they just kill everypony. I heard they even *eat* ponies, and that some can get into your head and charbroil your brain!”

I slowly nodded. Something didn’t quite seem right with that, but it was all third-hoof information, and from a single source. Still... “So why did she just walk off?”

Starlight was silent, and eventually gave a weary shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe it thought we wouldn’t be entertaining? As long as it leaves us alone, I don’t care why. My head hurts and I want to sleep.”

Ponies terrified of alicorns. It seemed so strange, but I had to remind myself that, despite how the time had seemed like a long nap from my perspective, there were two hundred (and two) years of context I had missed. Given the sudden relevance of the subject matter, it was time to learn more about my missing years.

“The only alicorns I’d ever heard of were the ones I read about,” I said. “The princesses. What happened to them?”

Starlight turned away. “They passed on,” she said, missing my look of alarm. So many fears and objections clamored for attention in my mind. Meanwhile, Starlight gestured upward. “They ascended. Became goddesses, watching over us.”

I had doubts, but to tell the truth, the stories I had heard of the

princesses made them sound halfway there already. Moving the sun and the moon? That's not normal. Clearly someone was still moving them. I suspected that the only part of Starlight's story that was likely to be outright truth was that the Princesses of Equestria were dead, but the continued motion of the sun and moon gave the idea of their ascension some measure of plausibility.

Then again, the sun and moon had moved before Celestia and Luna came to Equestria.

Starlight had started to climb the pile of coal that formed the floor of our temporary housing. She wavered atop it, as if she were about to lay down, but halted. Lifting a hoof, she wrinkled her nose. Her hooves were already blackened by the coal. I once again found myself wishing for my chitin; cleaning hair and fur was a pain. At least coal stains wouldn't show up too much on my gray coat.

Starlight pulled out her bedroll, laying it out atop the coal heap before laying atop it. She looked to me in the ghostly green light. "It's a little small, but we can share this. If you want."

"Thanks," I said, smiling as I approached, but I halted as a thought struck me. I lifted my medical box, popping open the lid. "Could you hold these in one of your bags for a bit?" I asked, showing the contents.

"I guess."

We shoveled my possessions into her bag, and I returned to the gap we had slipped into. The rain poured just outside, and I set the box just outside. I didn't have to wait long before pulling it back, filled to the brim, though the box proved somewhat leaky. I drank as much as I could, and returned to Starlight.

She gave a dry snort, but drank as well. After filling her bottle, I set the box outside so we would have plenty to drink in the morning. When I returned, she had already brought out her blanket. She held it up for me, and I lay down beside her on the narrow bedroll.

We didn't mind the cramped accommodations once night fell. The damp blanket did little to stave off the cold, and we spent the night curled up close together, sharing what warmth we had.



I spent the waking moments of the night thinking of alicorns.

It hadn't been one of the princesses, but that didn't tell me where she had come from. Had one of the princesses had a daughter? It seemed strange that, after so many centuries, one of them would choose to have a daughter, but it was hardly impossible. From the stories I heard, the Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle had practically been like a daughter to Princess Celestia. Maybe she had gotten a taste for such things, and decided to have a child of her own. It would be funny if her child had turned out to have such a similar coloration.

Or was this another recently-ascended alicorn, like Princess Cadenza? And with that particular coloration? If her cutie mark had matched the pony I was thinking of, that would seem likely, but it occurred to me that, for whatever reason, the alicorn hadn't had a cutie mark. That strange fact struck me as unnatural.

It was then that I had realized what I had seen.

I had just seen the legacy of the Ministry of Arcane Science.

There had been a program in that ministry to brainstorm the possibility of forcing alicorn ascension on a large scale, all under the administration of Twilight Sparkle. It was very hush-hush, but Equestria was never terribly good at proper security practices and procedures. I hadn't heard many details about the program in the information that crossed my path, but I had been under the impression that it hadn't progressed past feasibility studies.

What I saw that day suggested that they had progressed much further than that.

Despite the lack of a cutie mark, that coloration led me to wonder if I had just met an ancient and immortal Twilight Sparkle.

As many things did those days, the thought terrified me. I had heard horror stories of what happened to changelings that fell into the hooves of the M.A.S..

I did my best to push the thought from my mind and sleep.



While the rain did not cease by morning, it had at least relented enough that I could downgrade my assessment of the downpour from “torrential” to merely “heavy”.

We had a quick breakfast, where I split a ration with Starlight, and she split a snack cake with me. I had rarely indulged in the cheap, packaged snack cakes in the past, being sad alternatives to the real thing that I could easily acquire from any nearby bakery. It tasted exactly as I remembered, though I wasn’t sure if that was a testament to the amount of preservatives contained within them or a simple indictment of their taste even when new. Either way, the sweet and vaguely fruity flavor was a pleasant contrast to the dull-tasting rations.

After retrieving my medical box and drinking our fill, we prepared for our outing. Starlight had decided her light jacket was completely unsuited to the weather we were facing, and set about resolving that. To that end, her blanket and bedroll were repurposed into crude ponchos. She gave me the blanket, pointing out that she had her jacket, and the bedroll was too narrow and thin to provide much warmth. The use of a few spare straps and a length of rope secured them to our bodies, and we were ready to set out.

At the narrow exit from our shelter, she halted, and we looked out on the landscape. The rain had turned the hard, dry ground to mud. A stream had appeared, muddy water flowing between the ruined buildings as it ran off the slopes above. The rain turned the distant terrain into a murky haze, a gray miasma that twisted an already harsh land into something oddly sinister.

Starlight pointed out through the downpour, toward the intact water tower. “I want to go there first,” she said over the rain. “I want to get up there and have a look around, see if that alicorn is still around.”

The structure was a good twenty yards high, at least, the rain coursing off of it. I eyed the long ladder dubiously. “I don’t know. It looks pretty slick.”

“I’ve climbed worse than that,” she said. “Hell, it’s got a ladder.”

She set off before I could say any more, and I quickly followed. The

blanket hung over my head, keeping the rain mostly out of my eyes, but water splashed up my legs with every step. I had just started getting used to being dry, too.

By the time I had reached the water tower, she had already started climbing. I wanted to huddle under the tower to get out of the rain, but instead I stayed back, crouching at the edge of the ruined structure that had once loaded the mine's output into awaiting trains. I wanted to keep an eye out, not just for any potentially unfriendly ponies—though I hoped the weather would encourage them to stay indoors—but in case Starlight fell.

Fortunately, she did not, though she came down swiftly enough that, for a moment, I thought she had. I think I surprised myself when my reflex was to pull on my magic, intending to discard my disguise and catch her. Fortunately, I realized that she had hooked her hooves around the edge of the ladder and was sliding down, and stopped myself.

She hit the ground hard, spinning around. "Whisper!" she called out, immediately cantering over as she saw me. "We're leaving."

"Did you see her?" I asked, scrambling to keep up as she passed me, our hooves splashing through the mud.

"No," she said. "Raiders! The ones that attacked us. They're camped out at the mine!"

"The same ones?"

She nodded hard, the bit of bedroll hanging over her head flapping in the wind. We hit another downward slope, silent for a moment as we skittered and slid through the slippery mud. We each fell to our haunches a couple times, but kept going. When we hit the bottom, we broke out into a trot.

"You're sure?" I asked, already panting.

"I saw them," she said, faring no better than I was. "I scoped out their camp. They've got Thunderhead and Sharps!"

"What?" I managed to reach out, hooking a hoof over her shoulder, and we came to a halt. "What do you mean, they have them? I thought—"

"They hung their bodies from the walls!" Starlight shouted. Now that we were stopped, I could see she was trembling. The rain hid it,

but I was pretty sure she was crying.

My hoof fell away. I felt numb. Sure, she had told me of the horrific acts raiders committed, but it still seemed so obscene as to be unreal.

Starlight shivered, and I'm pretty sure it wasn't from the cold. It was enough to jostle me from my own thoughts, and I stepped forward, wrapping her in a wet and slightly muddy hug. The trembles quickly faded as she held on, and after several seconds, she spoke again. "Whisper, we need to keep going."

"Right," I said, releasing her and giving a weak smile. "Lead the way."

We set off again, eager to be gone from that place.



We lay still atop the ridge, unconcerned about the mud that soaked into our coats. After the many hours of trudging through the unrelenting rain, it no longer registered with us. My body was halfway numb from the cold as we lay there.

I was also sore, once again. My legs ached from a long day of slogging through the mud. When I wasn't fighting against the pull of mud that clung to my hooves with every step, I was scrambling to keep my balance as my hooves slid in the wet muck. Such slipping led to the occasional fall, further adding to our misery. I was pretty sure I weighed a good ten pounds more from all the mud clinging to my body, and the thick wool blanket might as well have been made of lead. I was already longing for the dry, dead desert I had first woken to.

At least we had plenty to drink.

And just for further insult, my neck hurt. My medical box and ammunition pouch were light, but after hours of walking, even their light weight was threatening to rub my neck raw. I'd even taken to wearing my rifle strapped across my back. It would be slower to get to in an emergency, but it was *not* light by any measure. I'd have to look into getting proper saddle bags once I got to Rust; as much as the idea of settling down and never traveling outside of a nice, comfy town again appealed to me on that muddy, rain-thrashed hill, my journey to discover the fate of my hive would not let me rest there longer than absolutely necessary.

Ignoring the long-term goals for what lay immediately before me, I shifted the neck straps once more, then called out over the wind and rain. “What do you see?”

Starlight slowly swept her broken Lancer around, peering through the telescopic sight attached to its side. The rain had continued to abate, having settled into what I would consider a more “normal” rate of precipitation. In its place, the wind had picked up dramatically, chilling me even through the makeshift poncho.

“I’m not seeing anypony,” Starlight said, and turned her scope back to the center of the valley before us.

The tracks ran across the open ground and passed through the remains of a tiny town, maybe a mile from where we lay. There was little still standing. The wooden water tower was collapsed and broken. Of the roughly two dozen structures that had comprised the tiny settlement, barely a quarter had roofs, and through the hazy mist of the rain it looked like few of those were intact. Most buildings were little more than empty foundations. The skeletal remains of a locomotive lay beside the tracks, stripped down by scavengers and abandoned.

Starlight lowered her Lancer. “Okay. Those are the same tracks we were on before. They’ll lead us right to Rust. If we followed them, we could probably get there around dusk.” She nodded toward the ghost town. “Or we could find some shelter in there, wait out the rest of the rain, and set off in the morning.”

I nodded. “As much as I’d love to get to Rust tonight, I’m pretty sick of this weather. I can barely feel my hooves.”

“Yeah,” she said, slinging her Lancer across her back and rising. “Okay, let’s head in, see if there’s any good shelter. And keep your eyes open. There’s probably not any salvage left, but there could always be something dangerous in those buildings.”

I nodded, pulling my rifle from my back to hang at my chest, ready to grab. Starlight checked her holster, and we set off.

The wind pushed against us as we walked, the ghostly forms of the ruined town slowly drawing closer.

What had once been the main—and really, *only*—street of the tiny town had been reduced to a muddy morass, which gripped and pulled

at our hooves with every step. We slowly made our way into town, past several gutted buildings. Anything of value had long since been removed. I trudged up to the first relatively intact building, peering in only to find that the inside had been stripped away. The roof had partially collapsed, crashing through the floor and into the cellar. No furniture remained. It didn't even have a front door. It would give minimal shelter at best, but anything was better than remaining outside.

Starlight continued on, leaning against the wind, and I moved on to the next building. She eventually halted before one of the last buildings, a small shack, and lifted her PipBuck to look at the screen. After a moment she lowered it again and stood there, frowning. Unlike the other buildings, the shack actually had a door.

I finally caught up, ducking my head to keep the wind out of my eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I think," she said in reply, squinting at the door. "Just wondering if there's anypony home."

I considered that for a moment before deciding that there was a very simple way to find out; I stepped up onto the decaying porch and gave three firm, loud knocks.

I hoped that, if there really was somepony living here, they might overlook the mud I had spattered across their door.

There was no answer. Starlight moved up to the structure and tried to peer in the window beside the door, but it had been boarded up. She turned to look at me and shrugged.

I gave the door a push, but it rattled and refused to open. After giving it another couple wiggles, Starlight found a catch at the top of the door. She pressed it, and the door swung open under the force of the wind. Then she lifted her PipBuck again, flicking on its light to illuminate the dark room beyond, while I bit down on the grip of my rifle.

It was cramped and full of debris. A broken-down couch was shoved against one wall, its cushions badly torn and stained. Some old, rusty tools were laid out atop a rickety table, while a large heap of bones filled most of the space beneath it. There were probably a dozen skulls among the bones, at least two of which looked to be pony skulls.

There was trash everywhere, covering shelves, chests, and scattered across the floor: old, empty bottles, crumpled wrappers, mangled food cans, empty pill bottles and potion vials, discarded injectors, and all manners of other detritus. It looked like somepony had used the shack as a trash heap.

The building seemed to have held up well enough. There were only a few steady drips from the roof above.

Starlight looked to me, and I shrugged. After a moment's consideration, she slid out her pistol and slowly stepped inside, the shadows twisting as she moved. I followed, the door behind me thumping against a pile of junk with each gust of wind. Starlight moved various heaps of debris, thoroughly searching the room before declaring, "Looks like there's nopony hiding here." I turned to close the door as her nose wrinkled up. "Oh, Luna, this place reeks. This isn't a home. Somepony was using it as a dump!"

I hadn't even noticed, but with the threat of possible combat passed, I finally registered the smell of decay permeating the air, with the lingering background hint of urine. I almost left the door open, just to see if we could air the place out, but I judged the smell to be less troublesome than the cold and shut it anyway.

Satisfied that there were no lurking threats, and with the fury of the storm muted by our questionable shelter, Starlight holstered her pistol, and we started poking around through the heaps of junk. Most of it was utterly worthless, but I found a couple bottles of cola, and a box on one of the shelves contained a mix of all manner of drugs. There was quite a variety there, with no particular theme or organization. There were a wide assortment of bottles, tins, inhalers, and injectors, running the gamut of medical, recreational, enhancement, and even combat drugs. Jostling the box to shift the contents around—I didn't dare reach in when I saw several uncovered needles—showed that many were partially empty, but there must have been near a hundred doses of various pharmaceuticals in that box.

I set the box back on the shelf, contemplating its contents. I had no idea what sort of market, cultural, or legal changes might have occurred over the past two hundred years, but if the prices of various drugs

had remained anywhere in the vicinity of their prices from before the megaspells, that was a rather valuable box. Also, exceptionally illegal, though recent events had led me to doubt the efficacy of any remaining Equestrian law enforcement agency.

"I found food," Starlight declared, drawing my attention to the chest she had pried open. A variety of old, heavily preserved food-like substances filled the case, many of which bore colorful wrappers showing what real food they were a shallow imitation of. A few had been opened and partially eaten, and what had once been an antique apple-flavored "pie" was now a gelatinous lump of mold. Still, there were almost twenty unopened packages, plus several bottles of water.

Starlight's nose scrunched up again as she eyed the former pie. "Well that's disgusting," she muttered. "Not sure why somepony would leave all this here, but screw 'em."

"I'm not so sure they just left it," I said, looking over the contents, then glancing back at the box I found. "I think somepony is living here."

She shook her head. "I've done a lot of scavenging. Stuff like that," she said, pointing to the moldy pie, "takes months to go that bad once opened. Whoever left this stuff hasn't been back here in a long time."

Still, I felt uncomfortable. "I just don't like the idea of taking somepony else's stuff."

"Everything used to belong to somepony," she said, fishing around in the chest to dig out a can of peaches. "Just some of them died a few centuries earlier than others." She gave me a wry, humorless smile. "Welcome to the joys of scavenging. This is how ponies live when they're not lucky enough to grow up on a farm."

"I... get that," I said, sinking down to sit on my haunches, and ignoring how wet and filthy the touch of my own body felt. "It just feels like this might be less scavenging and more stealing."

She frowned, looking over the can of peaches. I could practically see the silent battle being waged in her mind as she wavered back and forth, then finally sighed and tossed the can back into the chest. "Yeah, fine. We'll leave the stash for whoever left it. We don't really need the food that bad." She was silent a moment longer before adding, "Though I might just check back in a few weeks. If nobody's touched it by then,

I figure it's safe to call it abandoned."

It felt to me like that was skirting a very blurry line, but at the same time, I had to admit that I lacked the perspective to give an accurate judgement. She had lived in the world I found myself in, and I was still fresh and new to it. I couldn't be certain on her judgement, particularly given her dubious mental state at the time, but I couldn't deny that she had experience I lacked. "That sounds fine to me."

We shared a quick meal of our own shared food, splitting Starlight's last snack cake. After one final short outing to a nearby ruin for certain biological necessities, we were quite happy to be done with the outside world, and shed our sodden and improvised garments. Only casual attempts were made to free ourselves of the mud that clung to our coats, stomping our hooves against the floor to knock most of it away, and wearily ignoring the rest.

Then it was time to rest. Despite the drippy roof, the shack held back the cold enough that we didn't really need the sodden blanket. Huddling together on the saggy couch was enough to keep us warm. It wasn't even that uncomfortable, despite how worn and smelly it was.

I must have just fallen asleep when the door slammed open with a blast of wind, followed by a loud and slightly muffled bellow.

"The fuck are you two cunts doing in my house?!"

I jerked awake to find a hulking form standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the near-dark skies beyond. The voice was deep and gravelly, but also vaguely feminine, which made the pony seem all the more terrifying; she was *huge*! And I don't mean obese; I mean shockingly tall and stocky, almost bear-like in appearance.

Which, naturally, made the furious and profane outburst all the more frightening. "W-wait!" I shouted, raising my hooves as I sat up. "We're not here to cause trouble! My name's Whisper, and we—"

She stormed up to me, snarling, stomping, and clanking. In the darkness of the shack, the soft glow of Starlight's PipBuck cast faint, glossy highlights on the metal armor that encased the giant mare, a pair of distant reflections coming from deep within the mask. A large, bladed horn rose like a spear from the forehead of the helmet.

I backpedaled, but there was nowhere to go. At the last moment,

I realized my rifle was laying right next to me, but it was too late. The mare reared up, and two metal-clad hooves lashed out at me. With a sudden chill, I saw the pair of wicked, curving blades that jutted out over each hoof. Starlight cried out as they descended at me.

Instead of feeling those blades sink into me, I felt her mud-soaked hooves grab me by the chest and haul me up. She rose to her full height on her hind legs, lifting me up and slamming me back against the wall; the impact knocked my breath out and cracked one of the boards. My hindlegs kicked, dangling in mid-air as she she held me there. She kept me pinned by a single hoof as she raised her other hoof—and its attached blades!—menacingly. “Did I ask you your fucking name? What the—”

Her head snapped to the side as a faint blue glow joined the green. “If that gun so much as twitches, I’m going to *fucking feed it to you!*”

Starlight stared back, wide-eyed and trembling. She swallowed, eyes darting from the menacing face-mask to the raised hoof and back. Then she slowly raised her forehooves, the magic around her horn—and the grip of her holstered pistol—winking out.

The mare turned back to me, her face pressed close. I could barely see the glint of light off her eyes, but I could see the snarl under her mask; while most of the helm was solid metal, her snout was covered by a thick-barred muzzle, like you might see placed on a vicious animal. That somepony would wear something like that, seemingly of their own will, sent my mind into a tumble.

She growled, her words faintly muffled by the muzzle. “Now answer the fucking question before I start tearing off limbs, little bitch!”

To back up her words, she raised her hoof to my face again. While my attention had initially been on the blades curving over them, the proximity gave me a clear view of the underside of the hoof itself. It was not a regular shoe as I had expected. Instead, the underside looked like the head of a meat tenderizer.

Don’t know what a meat tenderizer is? Ask a griffon sometime. It’s a mallet with a particularly vicious-looking grid of pyramid-like metal spikes. They use it to tenderize meat and lack any imagination for names.

At that moment, I had something much like that threatening to tenderize my face.

"We just needed shelter!" I quickly sputtered. "We weren't going to take anything, we just needed a place to get out of the storm for a night!"

The glints of light under the helm winked out for just an instant as the mare blinked at my reply. It was enough to give just a hint of overly optimistic hope—"Haha, I guess this was all just a big misunderstanding!"—but that was shattered when her snarl grew.

"Does this look like a fucking hotel to you?" She punctuated the bellowing by pressing her hoof against my cheek, smearing it in mud, though I was far more concerned with the blade that hovered inches from my eye. Somewhere past the adrenaline, I was starting to notice how much the spiked hoof on my chest was hurting.

"No, and I'm sorry," I quickly said, cringing away from the spiked hoof. "We just needed a place to get out of the storm, and would have left again in the morning. We wouldn't have intruded if we knew it was somepony's home!"

"Well now you know!" The hoof pulled back from my face, returning to my chest only for her to pick me up again and throw me across the room! Everything became a jumble; I was able to work out afterwards that I had struck the wall, bounced off the table, and tumbled to the floor. Reeling from the impact, I barely managed a groan before the hulking mare kicked my medical box, which pegged me right in the face with a hollow *pang*! "So get the fuck out!"

She followed up by grabbing the next of our possessions to throw at me, which thankfully ended up being the wet blanket. I then ducked as she followed up by throwing my rifle out the door, and we scrambled to grab our belongings and get out. Starlight's magic served her well, and she bolted out the door just in front of me.

Starlight immediately tripped and went tumbling, and I nearly fell off the porch dodging around her. The funny, light-headed feeling in my head didn't help my coordination. Then Starlight screamed. I looked back to see her scrambling away from what she had tripped over.

It was a fishing net, full of severed pony heads.

"Shut the fuck up with that screaming!" the armored mare shouted,

grabbing the net and tossing it back into the darkness of her shack. “And if I see either of you cunts around here again, I’ll stomp your fucking heads in!”

She stepped back into the darkness and slammed the door. Starlight immediately grabbed up her belongings again, giving out a cry as she bolted, galloping away into the pouring rain. I quickly retrieved my belongings, snatching the rifle out of the mud, and hurried after her. She quickly outpaced me, limited as I was by trying to carry everything with one leg while running with the other three. Before long I was following her only by the glimpses of light from her PipBuck, flickering in the darkness.

Fortunately, she stopped just a minute later. As I drew closer, I could hear her calling out, her voice small behind the wind and rain. “Whisper? Whisper!” Her head was turning back and forth until I drew close enough for her to see, and she looked to me with wide, fearful eyes. She panted hard, trembling, but she calmed quickly as I approached. By the time I stood next to her, she had stilled herself, eyes closed and head hung as she panted.

“Are you okay?” I asked, and her head snapped up.

“I’m fine,” she quickly replied. She sat there a moment, giving only the faintest hint of a tremble, before pulling her bedroll over her once more. “I guess we’re going on to Rust tonight. We can’t stay around here.” She cast a glance back the way we came, her eyes betraying her fear. “Not with a raider living here.”

I have to admit, I had no desire to stay around a pony who seemed to make a habit of collecting ponies’ heads. Still, I looked up at the sky; there was only the faintest hint of light making its way through the clouds. In a few minutes, it would be near pitch black. Starlight turned on her PipBuck light, but its illumination struggled to pierce through the rain and gloom.

She looked around everywhere but at me, her ears drooping low as she secured her impromptu garment. I busied myself getting my own gear organized and the blanket draped over me. The ammo pouch bounced against my chest as I slipped its strap over my neck, and I winced at its touch. With the adrenaline fading, I was starting

to feel just how scraped up my chest was from those spiked hooves. I silently cursed my fleshy assumed form with its lack of proper chitin as I carefully prodded at the injuries, revealing several long but shallow scratches.

"You're bleeding!" Starlight looked at me with ears perked once again, my actions having finally drawn her attention back to me.

"It's just a few scratches," I said, lowering my hoof again; sympathy was nice and all, and very conducive to building up affection I could feed upon, but I had the feeling I should be gentle on her mental state at that moment. I could act up the pain to draw out more sympathy once we were safely to Rust.

"That's a lot of blood," Starlight said, and I realized she was staring not at my chest, but at my face.

Touching my snout with my hoof made me wince again, the strange, numb sensation in my face replaced with pain for a moment. I gave a wet sniff, then immediately coughed as I tasted copper. "Jud a blud-deh node," I said, holding a hoof to the side of my snout to stem the bleeding. "Ahm okay."

She looked doubtful, but didn't press the subject. Instead, she wavered back and forth, as if in silent debate with herself. Eventually she grumbled, "I'm tempted to go back there and shoot that bitch."

I had to restrain myself from showing the shock I felt at that remark. I didn't like where this was going, and I really didn't like what the stresses of the previous days had done to Starlight. Sitting around the caravan campfire, I certainly wouldn't have pictured that cheerful and exuberant young mare ever contemplating murdering another pony. Sure, it was a bit of a complicated situation, but it was still a concerning development. One that I'd certainly had a hoof in.

There was one point of comfort, however. She hadn't declared that she would; she had raised the possibility, looking to receive validation from me. I got the impression that she shared some of my own concerns. Whether she consciously intended it or not, she was giving me the opportunity to steer her decision.

I lowered my hoof to talk a little more clearly. "I don't know about that," I said. "I think we'd be better off just hurrying on to Rust."

She hesitated, and I could see her wavering a bit more. "...She's a raider," she said. "You saw that sack. She killed a bunch of ponies and took their heads. We'd be doing the Wasteland a favor."

"That was... concerning," I admitted. "But I'm a bit wary of doing something so permanent without knowing what's really going on. After all, she didn't try to kill us."

Starlight hesitated a moment longer, though her tense stance relaxed. "Even though she found us squatting in her home. Yeah. Fuck." She gave another tug at her saddlebags before starting to walk, her expression downcast. "Let's go. It's still a few hours to Rust."

Only a few seconds later, her walking slowed. "But what if those were ponies from Rust?"

"Then at least we'd know what's going on and who's responsible," I said, hobbling along on three legs as I carefully poked at my nose. I think the bleeding had stopped by then. "Though I doubt that's what happened. If she just murdered a bunch of ponies in a town, I doubt she'd have any compunctions about doing the same to a couple travelers."

The whole statement just sounded surreal to me at the time. I mean, I was talking about *ponies* doing these things. Even with the recent memory of the raider attack, I found the idea of a pony being a mass-murderer and collecting a few dozen heads of her victims to be too bizarre.

"Well if she did, I'm coming right back out here," Starlight said, resuming her pace.

I nodded as I followed along. "Me too."

We continued on, walking into the darkness.



Our way was slow. The feeble light gave us only a few feet of visibility in the downpour, and more than once we found ourselves backtracking to go around some sharp rise or rocky formation. The rare bolt of lightning gave us ghostly glimpses of the world around us, frozen in the flash of light. The rest of the time, our entire world was nothing more than a few feet of illumination in an endless darkness.

Not even the faintest hint of moonlight could pierce the heavy clouds above us.

We continued to slog on, our hooves dragging through the mud. Starlight was doing better than me; even with the improvements I had incorporated into my assumed form, she was still more fit than I was. My entire body ached, my eyelids drooped, and I silently stumbled on, following the bobbing, nearly hypnotic light of Starlight's PipBuck. I had long since moved past being concerned about the cold and wet. I no longer noticed it, save for the soft, almost soothing sound of rainfall all around me.

I'm not sure how much time passed in that half-asleep state before an exclamation from Starlight brought me back to conscious thought. I raised my head, blinking the weariness from my eyes. Ahead of us, maybe a few hundred yards away, several lights faintly cut through the haze of the rain, dimly outlining the squared-off silhouette of structures.

Starlight consulted her PipBuck, then let it fall back to her chest. "We're there. That's Rust."

I gave a weary, happy sigh. "Good. I'm about ready to collapse."

As we continued to walk, I expected her mood to pick up. Instead, I saw her ears drooping lower, her eyes sinking toward the ground, her stance growing slack. "What's wrong?" I asked.

She immediately tensed up again, mouth opening for a quick reply, but then she shut it again. The silent struggle ended quickly as she let out a low sigh. She came to a halt, her head sinking a bit as she looked on toward the dimly lit silhouette of our destination. "I just don't know what I'm going to do now."

I stopped beside her, our shoulders nearly touching. "What's wrong with your old plan?"

"What, being a guard?" She gave a weak, bitter snort. "Yeah, some guard I turned out to be. They're all dead, and I couldn't do anything to stop it."

"We were ambushed by a larger group," I said, "but you still got both of us out of there alive."

"You did half the work," she grumbled.

I almost sighed, but I checked myself. Instead, I saw an opportu-

nity. "Okay, we did it together, then." I gave her a gentle nudge on the shoulder. "And if we can get through that, I'm sure we can get through whatever comes next, together."

She hesitated. I did not miss the poorly concealed look of hope in her eyes. "Together?"

"Yeah," I said, giving her a smile. "That's what friends do, right?"

Her ears perked up. For a moment, she simply stared at me. Then, slowly, she smiled. It was the first genuine, wholehearted smile I had seen from her since the attack. "...Yeah."

I reached out, placing a hoof on her shoulder, and this time, she didn't pull away.

Smiling, we continued on to Rust. Together.

Chapter Four

Rust

Appleloosa was a small town. Founded less than forty years before I had been assigned there, it hadn't had the time to grow like some pony settlements had. Despite that, it had done well for itself. It had become an important place on the rail-lines of southern Equestria, grew to be a large supplier of food for the region, and had even started to industrialize.

Still, it was a small town. The kind of town that harkened back to its roots just a few decades earlier, when a small group of ponies built it from scratch.

Since waking from that chrysalis, I had seen only dust and decay. Equestria, it seemed, had fallen to ruin. Railways lay unused and unmaintained. Mines were abandoned. Towns had turned into ghost towns, and then ruins. To hear Starlight tell it, the land was harsh and inhospitable. There would be no bustling metropolises, no thriving towns. Given that, I set my expectations low.

It had been concerning to see that the town of Rust, set right across the train tracks, was entirely surrounded by metal walls comprised of toppled box-cars and scrap metal. Given the raiders we had encountered, we could hardly blame them, but it spoke volumes about how dangerous the land was outside that town.

We were eager to get in, but the massive iron gate blocked our way. We pounded on it, shouting over the rain and wind. Starlight waved the light of her PipBuck, trying to draw attention. Eventually she resorted to pulling out her pistol and firing three shots into the air, brilliant lines of light that flashed and sparkled in the rain. Less than a minute later, a pony in a rain poncho peered over the wall to see us there, waving.

It was another few minutes before the gate opened, the first pony having been joined by three others, all sporting firearms of one type or another.

We were ushered in, and I saw my first glimpse of the town of Rust. I had set my expectations low, and I was still disappointed.

The muddy courtyard beyond the gate was lit by a pair of hanging lights and surrounded by various structures. Everything was made of mismatched pieces of metal all welded together. Many of the pieces looked to have come from train cars, but I saw parts of skywagons, sheet metal, and various building materials in the mix. The only thing that elevated it all above the level of “crude shacks” was the concrete bases they had made for several buildings. At least they had electricity.

But the town as a whole barely extended past that courtyard. There were only about twenty buildings, and while most were multi-story, there couldn’t be many ponies living there. It wasn’t a town as I thought of the term, but in the most technical of senses. It was a shanty town, poor and run-down, slowly rusting away.

We were guided into a nearby building, with everypony pausing under an overhang to shake off some of the rain before stepping in. It wasn’t much to look at. A pair of cots were set on one side, with several cabinets nearby. A crude desk and chair sat before the shuttered window, and behind it was a couch that looked like it must have been old even before the war. A bare lightbulb in the ceiling cast a sharp light across the room.

As we shuffled in, stomping the mud from our hooves, I got a better look at the ponies that had met us. They all had firearms—a rifle, two shotguns, and a pistol—and two of them wore heavy barding, with bulky, angular metal plates covering their chests and flanks. It was an unnerving display, but I had certainly seen the need for caution and protection lately. A pair of strangers showing up with guns in the middle of the night might not look entirely friendly.

Fortunately, they didn’t look on-edge about the situation. I can’t imagine we looked like much of a threat as we shivered, dripping wet.

One of the ponies, a tan unicorn with one of the shotguns and much lighter barding, seemed to be in charge, judging by the way the others would glance his way, following his lead. He was older than the two armored ponies, though not nearly so old as the one who had first spotted us. Once we were all inside, the unicorn stepped forward, shotgun pointed at the ground, and spoke in a casual, conversational tone. “Okay, no offense intended, but we’re going to have to hold on

to your guns while you're here."

Starlight took a half step back. "These... these are very important to me," she said, ears pinning back.

"You'll get them back when you leave, I promise," he assured her calmly, though I noted at least one of the earth ponies tightening his grip on his bit. "We just can't let armed strangers run around with weapons within the walls."

That seemed perfectly reasonable to me, all things considered, and I unslung my rifle, passing it—stock first—to one of the other ponies. It wasn't like I was in any position to argue the point, if they insisted. Starlight hesitated a moment longer before cautiously saying, "Okay." She slid her pistol out of her holster, and the other unicorn took it in his magic. Setting it on the desk, he motioned to her broken Lancer. Her expression was pained as she hoofed it over, and for just a moment I could detect a faint trickle of love.

It joined her pistol and my rifle on the desk, and the atmosphere in the room relaxed considerably. Pistols were holstered and longarms were slung. The tan unicorn took a moment to brush his wet mane out of his eyes again, before casting a critical eye over us. "Okay. So, you mind telling me why the hell you two came pounding on our gate, in a storm, in the middle of the night?"

"It wasn't our original plan," I said, giving a wry smile. It was hard to pull off, what with how my body was insisting on shivering. For some reason, stepping into the comfortable and dry room had reminded my body of just how cold it was.

"We were in a caravan on the way here," Starlight said. "We got hit by raiders yesterday. We barely got out alive."

The tan unicorn stared at her for a second before his expression slumped. "Shit."

One of the armored earth ponies, a pale-blue stallion, grunted. "Raiders have been getting worse."

"Yeah," the unicorn said, grumbling, and looked to Starlight again. "Whose caravan was it?"

"Long Haul and Silver's," Starlight said.

The unicorn's eyes went wide, and he sank back to his haunches.

“Goddesses,” he said, his voice weak. He just stared off into space.

The other armored pony, a bright red mare, whistled.

“Time to raise the bounty,” the blue stallion muttered. “I’ll pitch in.” The red mare nodded, and the elderly stallion, still wearing his rain poncho, grunted in agreement.

The unicorn slowly nodded, his focus returning. “Yeah. Maybe it’s time to make it fifty caps. Ask around in the morning, see what we can scrounge up.”

There were a few nods, while Starlight asked, “Bounty?”

The unicorn slowly rose to his hooves again and nodded, though his voice wavered slightly. “Yeah. Raiders have always been a nuisance, and we take our protection seriously. Anypony who takes some of them out does us a favor, and we like to build a reputation for fair trade here in Rust. Somepony kills themselves a raider, they just need to bring us proof of the act, and we pay them.”

Starlight slowly nodded. “What do you take as proof?”

The unicorn reached up, tapping the side of his head. “The right ear. Cut it off and bring it here, we’ll give you forty caps for it. Fifty now, I suppose.”

If I weren’t halfway frozen, I would have blanched. Mutilating ponies for a bit of money? Even if they were bad ponies, the idea made my stomach twist.

“Oh,” Starlight said. “So... I suppose turning them to ash is out, huh?”

The unicorn mulled over that for a moment, even glancing back to the armored ponies. The mare gave a half smile and a shrug. Eventually he looked back, sighing. “Afraid I can’t just take a stranger’s word on that. Tell you what, though. I’ll talk to Mustard, see if he’ll put you up for a couple nights, no charge. Figure you likely had to kill one of them bastards that got Long Haul and Silver if you two got out of there alive, and it’d be mighty unkind of us to not show some appreciation for the fact.”

Starlight smiled. “That would be perfect. All I want to do right now is find a good bed and sleep half the day away.”

“As long as it’s warm,” I added.

“I think we can do that,” he said, giving a half-hearted smile that

quickly faded away. “So, what do I call you two?”

“Starlight.”

“Whisper Winds.”

He took turns shaking our hooves. “My name’s Steel Shot. Welcome to Rust.”



Starlight and I quickly scrubbed at our coats, letting the icy rain carry away the mud and dirt. We shivered and stomped our hooves as muddy water ran off the narrow balcony, cleaning as quickly as we could. We even took turns quickly wiping clean places we couldn’t reach well while the other stood there, trying not to shake too much from the cold.

As soon as we were done we bolted back into the room Steel Shot had arranged for us.

“Holy *shit* that was cold!” Starlight said, bounding over to one of the beds to pull off the blanket and wrap herself in it. I did the same with the other bed, and we both huddled up next to the radiator, greedily soaking in the warmth. I might not be quite so prone to profanity as many ponies seemed to be, but I agreed wholeheartedly with her sentiment.

“At least we’ve got a nice warm room,” I said, tugging the blanket a little tighter around me.

“Thank goodness for that,” she agreed, and we sat there, silent but for the chattering of teeth.

The descriptor of “nice” may have been a bit generous, if not for comparison to recent events. That’s not to say it was bad, though. Mustard ran what was essentially a hotel, giving ponies a place to sleep. At three stories tall, it was one of the largest buildings in Rust. The common room on the first floor gave cheap lodging to those who didn’t need privacy, while the second and third floor had a few rooms each. The three rooms on the top floor were the largest, and surprisingly, it was one of these rooms that Steel Shot had arranged for us.

Despite being one of the “best” rooms, it was fairly sparse. It was small, with just enough room for the two beds, a table with a couple of chairs, a pair of dressers, and the radiator that we were huddled in front

of. None of that really mattered to me. It held the warmth in and the rain out, so I was hardly going to complain.

As the warmth slowly sank into our bodies, the shivers faded away, until we sat silently, side-by-side. Freed from obsessing over how cold I was, my mind turned to considering my companion, my lifeline in this strange new land I found myself in. Despite showing improvement, I worried about her.

She apparently had little resources of her own. When mentioning needing to find some way to earn a living, she had noted that she had little in the way of money. She hadn't been paid for guarding the caravan, as that was going to be handled on their arrival in Rust. Other than a few days' worth of food, most of which was the rations I had found, we had little that could be traded for more money. The spirit of cooperation was all well and good, but even pooled together our resources were sorely lacking. If we couldn't find paying jobs quickly, we were in trouble.

Given the size of the town, employment seemed like it would pose a challenge, and less savory methods of acquiring money and resources would be problematic at best. Theft was entirely out of the question. Even utilizing deception and misdirection, suspicion would naturally fall on the strange newcomers who arrived in the middle of the night. I didn't mind having a good practical excuse to avoid theft, though. With how harsh the world appeared to be, I didn't favor the idea of stealing something from a pony who might need it to survive.

Still, I had options that Starlight might not. Despite finding civilization, my survival over the next few weeks was far from ensured. Starlight, lacking my flexibility, was likely at even more risk. She might want to stay here in Rust, making a more stable life, rather than heading out into the Wasteland, risking everything. I, however, had no option of remaining there. I would stay long enough to recover and ensure my own safety, but soon I had to set out again.

But more than that, I figured the lack of resources, and the added drain I would be putting on them, had to be putting more stress on her at a time when stress was the last thing she needed. We might soon be facing the choice of selling off resources we wanted to keep—as much

as I disliked the need for such a thing, I did not want to sell my newly acquired rifle—or setting out to find a living elsewhere, outside the safety of Rust’s walls.

All these concerns mounted, and it made me worry about how Starlight was taking things.

So I was a bit surprised when the first thing she said was, “I’ve never had a friend before.”

After a moment to reorganize my thoughts, I managed a smile. “I’m sure you’ll be surprised to hear I haven’t, either, what with growing up on an isolated farm in the middle of nowhere.” She shook slightly with a silent chuckle. “Still, I find that hard to believe. You seem so friendly and cheerful most of the time, it’s hard to imagine you’ve never made a friend before.”

“Well, okay, there were a few others that I talked with, and I guess we were *friendly*, but I don’t know if I’d really call them friends.” She relaxed a bit more, leaning against me. “At least... not like proper friends. There weren’t really any ponies my age where I grew up, and I didn’t spend much time in town. My mom and I were always out hunting or salvaging. I liked some of the ponies I met, but... I never really had the opportunity to have a friend.”

As we’d only known each other for barely two days, I felt the distinction she was making was perhaps a bit fine. Still, they had been two extremely eventful days, where our lives had depended on the other. It might be a bit quick, but I intended to prove her assumption correct.

I reached out, wrapping my foreleg and blanket around her shoulders, a silent reply to her statement. She didn’t say anything in return, merely leaning into the sideways hug. A tiny hint of affection met my senses. It was faint, but holding. I left it alone. Just as one does not graze on a seedling, I was not going to eat away at that nascent emotion.

We sat there, eyes growing heavy. At some point her head turned as she looked at me, and I felt her tense. “Those look bad.”

I followed her gaze to my chest, then raised a hoof to touch the deep scrapes in my chest. No longer numb from the cold, the wounds stung. Scrapes crossed all over my chest. The ones in the center, where the spiked hoof had pinned me against the wall, were the deepest. They

were not so deep to as to be serious, although a few leaked a little bit of blood. "Eh, I'll live."

"We should take care of those," she said, pulling out from under my hoof as she faced me, looking closely at the cuts. "Don't you have one of those magic-laced bandages?"

"I'd rather save it in case of something serious," I said. "This will heal up quick enough on its own."

"Yeah, unless it gets infected," she said, reaching out to touch beside one of the scrapes. I winced, giving a short, soft hiss of pain. "Who knows what kind of gunk she had encrusted on those hooves?" Her expression tightened, ears standing alert. "She probably had pony blood on them."

She remained silent and tense for only a moment before giving a decisive shake of her head. "No." Her horn lit, levitating over her bags and pulling out supplies. "We need to clean out your wounds, get them bandaged, and give you a good dose of antibiotics to be sure. I don't plan on losing my first friend to some infection."

I thought she was over-reacting, but I relented. Given her earlier worries, it was probably worthwhile to give her something to feel useful about. "I take it you've done this before?"

"On your back," she said, motioning with her hooves as she pulled out medical supplies, and I complied. "And yes, quite a bit. I don't know any of that fancy doctoring stuff, but mom made sure I knew plenty about basic first-aid. There's all sorts of ways you can get scraped up when scavenging, and most of the things you can scrape yourself on haven't been clean in a couple hundred years. Mom knew some other scavengers that lost limbs to some tiny cut that got infected."

She lifted a foreleg up, wiggling her hoof and smiling. "You might not be able to tell, but I got scraped up plenty as a kid. Probably all sorts of tiny little scars all over my legs, just you can't tell under my coat. Only reason I'm not scarred-up like some ponies is because we treated each and every scrape seriously."

Setting her hoof down again, she leaned in and used her magic to prod at my wounds. I grunted and tensed, trying to stay silent. "Sorry," she quietly murmured, though she kept going. "Wow. Yeah, there's

a bunch of dirt ground in there.” She sat back, looking at my chest as she quietly chewed on her lip.

Eventually she picked up a pill bottle, opened it, and retrieved a single pill. “Here, take this,” she said, passing it and the bottle of water to me.

“Is this the antibiotic?”

“Painkiller.” She gave a lopsided smile. “Sorry. This is going to suck.”

I sighed, but downed the pill.

“I’ll give it a few minutes to kick in,” she said as she sorted through her medical supplies. In addition to a few bandages, she had medical tape, two bottles, another pill bottle, and a broken toothbrush. “Don’t worry, I gave you the good stuff. You might feel a bit out of it when it kicks in.”

“If I feel any more out of it, I’ll be asleep.”

“That might be for the better,” she said, the lopsided smile returning as she lifted the broken toothbrush. “This should have been done hours ago, so I’m going to be thorough. I need to get all the dirt and nasty crap out and sterilize the wounds.”

I looked at the toothbrush, recognizing what was about to happen. I really didn’t like the idea, but merely groaned as I laid my head back.

She let me rest for a few minutes, while I just lay there. I kind of lost track of time. Eventually I felt a tapping on my side. I lifted my head, which felt strangely heavy. I felt sluggish, and the whole world seemed just a bit further away. “You still with me?” she asked, and I nodded.

“I think it’s kicked in,” I said, my words oddly distant in my ears.

She chuckled softly, rinsing her brush with a bit of fluid from one of the bottles, and then got to work. Even with the painkillers dulling my senses, having a brush jammed into a deep scrape and vigorously dragged back and forth was less than pleasant. I grunted, gritting my teeth, and did my best to remain still.

I didn’t actually see most of what she did. There was a lot of scrubbing, which left my chest feeling raw and wrong. I would have gladly reverted to my natural form just to escape the flaws of that flesh-covered body I had assumed, except then I’d probably have the dirty wounds on the inside of my exoskeleton. Instead, I simply endured. She eventually

set the brush aside, wiping my chest down with a damp cloth. Then she dribbled something into the wounds that stung even through the painkillers, and again wiped with the damp cloth.

I'm not sure how long it was until she told me to sit up, a task that I, embarrassingly, needed help with. Once I was upright, she wrapped the bandage tightly around my chest. She remained there, helping to keep me from falling over as she floated over a pill. "Antibiotic," she said, and I downed the pill. "And candy," she added with a smile, floating a single piece of hard candy before me. I chuckled faintly, popping it in my mouth, and only barely stopping myself from swallowing it like the pill before it.

Sour apple. It was delicious.

"And now we need to get you in bed," Starlight said, nudging me lightly.

I didn't move. "I think I'll just fall down and sleep here," I said, my words slurring together. I almost spit out my candy on accident.

"Nope," Starlight said, pressing her shoulder against me as she tried to get me up. "Bed rest means bed. Doctor's orders."

I relented, struggling up to my hooves. The ground swayed, and if not for her pressing against my side, I probably would have fallen. Despite all that, I found myself in a surprisingly good mood, with a lazy smile plastered across my muzzle as we slowly made our way to one of the cots. "I don't think you're a real medical doctor," I said, the words mushy in my mouth. "Can I see your medical license?"

"Sure," she said, smiling beside me. "Just as soon as I pull one out of my butt."

"On second thought, I'll take your word for it." I finally flopped down on the bed. My candy fell from my open mouth to land on the cot beside me, and it took a couple tries before I managed to close my mouth around it again. I can only imagine Starlight rolling her eyes in reaction to my drugged behavior. I honestly don't remember most of what was going on. She brought me my blanket, and I think I tried to say something to her.

The next thing I remembered was waking up around mid-day, slow

and groggy, with a worn-down piece of hard candy stuck to my cheek.



My assessment of Rust was marginally improved by seeing it in the light of day.

The rain had ended by the time I woke, apart from the occasional drip from high above. The clouds even looked a fair bit lighter. The town itself, however, was still soaking wet. The ground was all mud and deep puddles, while water pooled on any flat surface and dripped slowly from everything else. Even without the rain, everything was sodden and damp.

Fortunately, the shanty-town-like construction of Rust, with its multiple levels of structures, meant you could go from one end of the little town to the other without actually touching the ground. Sure, the metal walkways had their own share of puddles, and it wasn't long before my fetlocks were soaked with icy water, but at least it was just water instead of mud.

The walkways were also dangerously slippery in places, though the rails set alongside the more elevated paths saved me from any serious falls. Each slip was accompanied by a pained sensation in my chest as that stupid, fleshy pony skin twisted and pulled at the wounds.

Daylight also let me see that there was a bit more to the town than I had first assumed. The town proper was just as small and compact as I had thought, but there was more beyond that. Quite a few train cars lay scattered about the tracks, victims first of some ancient derailment, and more recently of scavengers who had cut away entire sections of them. More notably, there was a large field full of crops set right next to the town, with a dozen ponies working among the plants. The crops appeared to be mostly corn and wheat, and the entire area was enclosed in a crude fence. It was a far cry from the farmlands I had seen before, even at Appleloosa, but it was the first significant vegetation I had seen since waking.

But at the same time, I couldn't help feeling even more disappointed by what I found. Or more, what I didn't find.

Even with the flurry of paranoia and propaganda, there had always

been a certain feeling to pony settlements. The best comparison I can think of is living near a particularly prolific bakery, with the constant smell of fresh baking bread. You could feel the love in the air, as if it had soaked into the town itself.

Rust didn't have that feeling.

Starlight and I had split up after breakfast, setting out to look for work. I had set my sights on Steel Shot, and was told that I could find him that morning in "the overlook". The overlook ended up being the tallest point in town, an enclosed platform with heavy, shuttered windows, built atop another three-story building that served as both the town hall and Steel Shot's home.

I climbed the rickety stairs into the platform. Inside, I found that the only furnishings were a pair of chairs and a mounted gun. The gun caught me off-guard, not for its presence, but for its size. I had paid close attention to Equestrian military technology, so I recognized it right away, even in its worn state: a "Model 1" heavy machine gun. It was a new weapon that they had started mounting on some military vehicles for field tests, intended to counter zebra combat robots and light vehicles. The texts and diagrams did little to prepare me for seeing it myself; even though I recognized the shape and design, I had never grasped the *scale* of the weapon before then.

It was huge in every way. The bullets themselves were the size of the entire round for my rifle, but tapered to a point, and the tremendous casings flared even wider. Its heavy mount held it high enough that it could easily shoot out of the open windows, and could even be moved around if needed, if one were particularly strong. The combination of gun and mount probably weighed more than I did.

Honestly, it struck me as overkill, though I worried that I might be wrong.

Steel Shot was there, looking out over the town walls, as was the armored red mare from the previous night. She was in the middle of yawning as I came up, looking as if she had been up all night. They both gave me a nod as they saw me enter, and Steel Shot passed the binoculars to the mare before speaking to me. "Something we can help you with, miss?" Then, noting the bandage around my chest, asked,

“You all right, there?”

“Oh, I’m fine, thank you,” I said with a smile. “Just got a bit scraped up on the way here. I can’t complain, all things considered.” There was a flicker of a grimace in his expression, clearly understanding what I meant. “I also wanted to thank you, for putting us up for the night. It was very generous of you.”

“Think nothing of it,” he replied, though his smile was halfhearted. “Mustard had plenty of open rooms, and I’m certainly not the one to be ungrateful to someone who’s been tussling with raiders.”

“Nonetheless, I wanted to thank you,” I said. “It’s more than some would do. I also had something else I wanted to talk about.”

When he gave a curious raise of an eyebrow, I continued. “Well... since our caravan got hit, we don’t have much to our names. Just what we had on us at the time, which isn’t much. We’re not looking for charity, but we were hoping there might be some work we could do here, to earn our keep?”

The concerned look that crossed his face told me the answer even before he spoke. “We’re a small town, don’t really have a lot of work to be done that we don’t take care of ourselves.” Still, he thought on it for a bit before asking, “You any good with plants?”

“I grew up on a farm, but I’ve never been any good at it. I could dig and water where somepony tells me, but other than that...”

He frowned and nodded. “Well, how about metal-working, then? Or mechanics?”

I shook my head. “Starlight might.”

He sighed. “If she does, we might be able to find a little work helping out here and there, but I doubt it would be very much. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said, giving a sad smile in reply. “Thank you for the consideration, at least.”

I suppose there was some meager consolation that it meant Starlight would have little reason to remain here when I had to leave.

“Hey,” he called out, as I turned to leave. Looking back, he pointed out the window, toward the largest building in the town. “You might want to head down to the foundry. I can’t promise you anything, but maybe Scrap or Singe have some odd jobs you might be able to

help with.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll go check it out.”

I descended the stairs again before making my way to the building he had indicated. It was almost as tall as Mustard’s place, but even as I approached I could see it was only a single level. The cavernous space had a large assortment of machines, the purpose of which I could only guess at. It looked almost like a factory, albeit one with rusted equipment and a leaky roof.

Yet as run-down and industrial as the place was, it had the one thing the rest of Rust lacked; it *felt* like a pony’s place. It felt like somepony had spent a life of love and happiness there. It was the first place I had found since waking up that felt *right*.

I entered, shielding my eyes against the sudden flash of sparks. A red-coated mare that looked to be Starlight’s age was cutting into a gutted skywagon that hung in the middle of the chamber. She sat on its roof, cutting away with a torch.

“Look out below!” she called out a moment before the shower of sparks ended, and the side of the skywagon fell free. I jumped, ears pinning back at the deafening clang of several hundred pounds of metal striking the concrete floor.

The mare was laughing as she lifted her face-mask, looking down at her hoof-work. Her grin turned even brighter when she saw me. “Hey, new-face! Whatcha you lookin’ for?”

I remember noting that she seemed to be faintly smoking. Judging by the state of her frazzled mane and coat, it seemed that was a common occurrence.

Taking a moment to roll my jaw and pop my ears after the aural assault, I replied. “Steel Shot told me to come here. Said I should ask around to see if anyone had any work they needed done. I’m kind of looking for a job.”

She laughed again before swinging down from the side of the suspended skywagon, hanging in mid-air for a moment before dropping to the ground. “Hah, he ain’t lookin’ to replace me, is he?”

“No, I don’t—”

“I’m kidding,” she said with a chuckle, and offered me a hoof that

I cautiously shook. "He'd never be able to replace me. But anyway, work? I don't know." She released my hoof and turned, shouting out across the room. "Hey, Scrap! You got any work you need done?"

The head of a large blue stallion peeked up over a dividing wall. "What? I thought you needed to finish cutting up that stupid wagon?"

"Not for me, dingus," she replied with an exaggerated roll of her eyes, and motioned my way. "For her!"

He looked at me for a moment before dropping back below the wall. A few seconds later he emerged from behind the machinery, walking up to us with a curious expression. "What's this about work, then?"

"She's lookin' for a job," the red mare said.

"A job?" He frowned, cocking his head at me as he came to a halt. He was quite a bit taller than me. "I don't know, not really much need for extra hooves, right now."

I nodded, unsurprised by his answer. "I don't suppose there's anything I could do to help you with, in exchange for a few caps?"

"I don't know," he said, raising a large, oil-stained hoof to his chin. "Maybe if you're some super-genius mechanic, I could let you take a poke at the water pump. Other than that... heck, we need material more than we need hooves to work it."

"Oh? What kind of material?"

"Scrap and parts, mostly," he said with a shrug. "Machine parts, bearings, lubricants, new tools, gaskets. Heck, anything with rubber. Not so much electronics, but just about anything else. Well, except steel, we got plenty of that."

"Well... if I find any, I'll let you know."

I headed out, disappointed, and mulled over my options. Right then, I was still on the "survive" part of my plan. I needed enough love to search for signs of my hive, and that meant I needed some friends. There were plenty of ponies I could steer into friendships there in Rust, but I would need bits—sorry, caps—to live there. I had built up a friendship with Starlight, but she would need caps to live there, too. Without caps, she would have to move on, and I was inclined to go with her.

On the plus side, she had a past of scavenging, digging up relics of

the old world. While it seemed she had set her sights on a new career, she might find that to be an acceptable way of earning the money needed to stay here. On the other hoof, it also would likely mean long periods away from town. I expected that the areas around any towns would have been picked clean decades ago. That meant longer trips, and fewer ponies to befriend.

But it also meant fewer ties to one place, giving me more freedom to go looking for my hive. If the ponies I fed on could accompany me during my search, that would ease things immensely.

I still wanted more ponies, though. Starlight could keep me alive on her own, but I'd put a fair drain on her simply surviving. Any excess magic use would put a potentially dangerous amount of strain on her, on top of the stress of regular travel. I needed more ponies, or I would be facing fairly sharp limitations on my own ability.

Just in case you didn't know, changelings *really* don't like limitations.

I was still pondering these things, and meandering aimlessly around the town, when Starlight came bounding up to me. She was grinning. "I found us a job!"

I blinked in surprise, and smiled, though my thoughts had left me uncertain how to feel about the issue. "That's great! What is it?"

She came to a halt before me, standing tall and proud as she declared, "Salvage!"

I blinked once again. "Uh, salvage?"

"Yep!" She said, practically bouncing as she moved up beside me and leaned in, speaking in a hushed voice. "Met a guy who knows of a place that hasn't been touched since the war!" She gave me a nudge. "Come on, he wanted to meet up with you before we settle on anything!"

I followed, trying not to show my uncertainty.

She led me to a building with an ancient sign that simply read "Food", right across from a general store with a crude sign that read "Stuff". The bottom floor of "Food" was part restaurant, part bar, and part grocery store. Wide windows encircled almost the entire building, the metal shutters raised to let in the light. It also let in the breeze. Fortunately, it had started to warm up once the rain had stopped.

Only a few ponies were inside, grabbing a quick lunch. Looking them over, I had a strong suspicion which one we were there to meet. My suspicions proved true as Starlight led me back to a grumpy looking yellow earth pony stallion by the back wall, nursing a drink. Judging from his demeanor, I assumed he sat there because it was the closest he could get to a gloomy back corner in the fairly well-lit room.

He saw our approach, eying me with a glower. I got the impression he didn't approve of what he saw.

"We're back!" Starlight helpfully announced.

"Uh-huh," he said in reply, frowning.

My first impression of the stallion was not very positive.

Being one whose career was built primarily upon social skills, I decided to suppress the more natural reaction the cold welcome encouraged, and instead responded diplomatically. "My name is Whisper Winds. I'm afraid Starlight forgot to tell me your name."

Starlight looked to me, looking quite amused. The stallion, however, was not. "Dusty."

After coming to the realization that he was not going to continue, I spoke again. "I understand you had some sort of job for us?"

He continued to frown for a moment before replying. "I found out about a place. Problem is, I can't find any pony worth a damn in a fight who's willing to leave town, and I'm not going out on my own. So I'm just stuck here waiting, hoping nopony else finds my prize." He paused to look me over. "And no offense, but neither of you look like the type that's good in a fight."

"Hey!" Starlight snapped. "We can fight. Hell, we were in a big fight just a couple days ago. Got ambushed by raiders, but we made it through just fine."

He looked between the two of us. "So you two were in the caravan that got hit."

I nodded, and after a moment he relaxed, slumping back in his seat. "Suppose that explains where you two came from. Guess I'm not the only one having a shitty month."

As much as I would have loved to make some sarcastic retort, since I was fairly certain he couldn't even *imagine* how bad the past few days

had been for me, I instead offered a sympathetic response. "Yeah, that seems to be going around."

He grunted a weak approximation of a laugh, but the disapproving glower had vanished. He even lifted his glass, tipping it in our direction before downing the rest of it. Setting it back down, he asked, "So what kind of combat experience do you two have?"

We sat down at the table, and Starlight grinned proudly. "I've gone hunting pretty much since I could walk," she said. It wasn't the first time I had heard her mention hunting, though it still seemed strange to me. Ponies don't generally eat meat, though I suppose there was the occasional fish. One of the more disappointing parts of living among ponies is the excessively herbivorous diet.

"I'm a great shot, too. Just... need to get my rifle fixed. One of the raiders broke it." She smirked. "Killed her, though. Killed another one before that. Well, probably. I vaporized his shoulder, and I think part of his chest, too."

"Uh-huh," he said, and looked to me. Starlight's eyes narrowed.

I shrugged. "I've got basic firearm training, but that ambush was the only time I've been in a gunfight. All I managed to do was put out some suppressing fire while we retreated." That sounded a lot better than aimlessly spraying bullets while running away. "Are you expecting a fight?"

"No, but you don't always have a say in that when you're in the Wasteland, and I'm not going to go unprepared." He slowly looked between us. "...And you're not exactly inspiring much confidence. Raiders make for shitty soldiers. Most of them are pretty easy to kill. And you." He gestured my way. "...You did at least *shoot* guns during your training, right? Hell, you're wounded."

"They're just scratches," I said, pulling down the edge of a bandage to show them. "The bandage is only there to keep them from getting infected."

"Fair enough," he said, "but I'm not interested in putting my life in the hooves of ponies with no experience."

"Oh yeah?" Starlight said as she leaned over the table. "And how much experience do you have with scavenging, then? Or dangerous

ruins? Do you have any idea what to look out for, or what kind of scrap is valuable instead of junk? I've been in and out of Dodge City more times than you can count. How about you?"

His expression didn't show it, but I got the impression from the momentary pause that something she had said made him reconsider his judgement. His eyes flickered my way, and I quickly threw a bit more fuel on the fire Starlight had started. "And I know all about the old world and its tech."

Starlight smiled again. "So you're not just getting a couple ponies who can hold their own in a fight, you're also getting a couple experts at scavenging to make sure you get the best prizes." She leaned in even further. "And more importantly, we're here, now. I know how rumors of big hauls spread. If you know about some prime loot, you can bet some other pony does, and you need to get there before they do. We can make sure you get all the juiciest stuff before anypony else."

He looked away, muttering something under his breath, but considering her words nonetheless. I waited in silence until he finally looked back. "Two conditions," he said, and Starlight immediately relaxed, grinning.

"First, when it comes to a fight, you do what I say, right then, no questions asked. I'm used to dealing with professional soldiers, not hot-shot know-it-all mercs. You might have some skills, but you don't have shit for experience. I do. Good?"

"Yeah," Starlight said, though I suspected she didn't intend to uphold the agreement. I merely nodded.

"Second, the split is fifty-fifty, and you're not going to renegotiate that later, no matter what happens."

"No way," Starlight said. "It's a three-way split, nice and even. We're the salvage experts, so we're going to be doing most of the work."

"I don't need you," Dusty said, glowering. "The only reason I'm even considering you is because there's nopony else around, and I need somepony to watch my back. I figure between the two of you, you *might* add up to a single decent fighter. Hell, I wouldn't even be bringing both of you, except I get the impression you're a package deal. Am I right?"

Starlight gave a sharp nod. "Yep."

"Then you can either both come with me and get half of the loot *I* lead you to, or you can both stay here and get nothing."

The pair of them continued to glare at each other for several seconds, while I sat back and waited. Eventually Starlight wavered, glancing my way. I nodded, and she finally relented. "Fine. Since it's your stake, you can keep half of it. But when it comes to salvaging, you do what *we* say. Fair?"

He nodded, though he didn't look happy about it. "Deal."

They reached over the table, shaking hooves, and we all stood. "How soon can you two be ready to move out?"

I was going to say we were ready then, but Starlight spoke first. "It depends. Where are we going?"

"Hah, no," he said, frowning at her again. "You want to find this place, you'll have to follow me."

Starlight rolled her eyes. "Is it urban or rural? Are we going to need to be ready to climb up buildings? Are we climbing down? Is this above ground or below? Do we expect lots of locked doors? Robotic security? Radiation? Taint? Poison gas? Hostile wildlife? Is it likely to be booby-trapped?" She leveled a flat glare at him. "Or do you expect us to over-equip ourselves to account for every single possibility because you won't give us basic information?"

I had to admit, I was a little surprised at the list of concerns she rattled off. It was perhaps a bit too blunt and confrontational, but it seemed to do the job, as Dusty sighed. "It's an old Army depot, out in the desert. I don't know what's inside it, just that it has a few skywagons and a motorwagon inside the fence, and they supposedly looked in good shape. I figure if anypony else knew about the place, those would be gone or stripped, especially the motorwagon."

"Okay," Starlight said, nodding. "Did you see anything else?"

"I didn't see the place myself. It was a merchant that saw it, maybe two weeks ago. He doesn't like old ruins, so he didn't check it out himself. Something about bad experiences. Anyway, he told me about it since I helped him out, and since I don't have any better prospects, I figured I'd give it a look."

Starlight was looking at her PipBuck; I saw she had switched to the map. “A depot in the desert. I’m guessing we’re heading east, then?”

Dusty narrowed his eyes, silent for a moment before replying. “Yeah. Now how does that matter?”

“Because I’d like to make a detour,” she replied, letting her PipBuck fall back to her chest and smiling. “Gemstone is out east, and I’d like to stop by there.”

“Why?”

“Because my Lancer was made by a unicorn living in Gemstone,” she said. “I figure that’s the best place to look for someone who can fix it up.”

“Hiring a merc with a broken gun,” Dusty grumbled, then motioned to her PipBuck. “Let me see that.” Unlike when she shared it with me, Starlight looked much more wary about sharing with him, and she kept a hoof resting atop it as he looked at the screen. He scanned over the map for a few moments before sighing again. “Yeah, I suppose. It’ll be maybe half a day out of our way.”

“Good,” Starlight said, pulling back her PipBuck. “Then we’ll be ready to go as soon as we get our weapons back from Steel Shot.”

“Okay, then,” Dusty said. “Get your shit. I’ll meet you outside the gate. We can still get most of a day’s travel in, and I expect you two to hustle to make up for the time lost on your little detour.”

“You got it!” Starlight said, and turned to loop a foreleg around my shoulder and give a squeeze. “Come on, Whisper! Let’s get going!”

We separated from Dusty and hurried back to our room. Starlight seemed in such a good mood that I was reluctant to voice any concerns. She could really use the opportunity for some relief, I thought. Still, the concerns would not resolve themselves, and once we were back in our room, I had to address them. “So, do you think this is a good idea?”

“What, the scavenging run?” She shrugged as she gathered up her belongings, left scattered about during her digging for first-aid supplies. “Yeah. I mean, it’s not exactly what I’d *like* to do, but I’ve done it enough it’ll be easy going. We need caps, and if he’s really got a fresh claim, we could get a small fortune out of it.”

“The money would be useful,” I admitted.

"Yeah. Heck, the only thing I don't like about the whole deal is how we're only getting half a share each. Sure, I get that it's his find, but still." She shrugged. "Maybe we can get him to reconsider, later."

"He seemed pretty clear that he would not."

"Eh, sure," she said, waving a hoof. "But we'll see. I can be very persuasive."

I couldn't help frowning at that. She didn't seem to want to let it go, but I couldn't imagine Dusty would be very happy about her going back on our agreement like that. "How about this," I said, hoping I might find a more amiable solution. "He seems to dislike you, so he's probably going to be pretty defensive if you bring it up. How about you let me handle that part. I can be subtle about it, make sure he sees just how useful we really are without bringing up the matter of money directly." That, or maybe making it my responsibility might distract her long enough to forget about the whole thing.

"Hmm." She thought on it for a moment, slowly smiling. "Yeah, that could work. Hell, he'll see how useful we are once we get there, that's for sure. Dumbass."

I shook my head, but remained silent as we gathered up our belongings. My part was simple, especially when Starlight snatched up my medical box, loaded her own medical supplies into it, and stuffed it into her own bags. "We need to get you real bags once we get to Gemstone, so you're not wearing everything around your neck." She gave a little magical tug on her PipBuck's strap. "It can get a little tiring, I know."

"Yeah, that wire isn't a very comfortable strap. Thanks." I smiled, and she beamed back at me. "Although why wait till Gemstone? Shouldn't they have saddlebags in that store we saw? And we could probably use some ponchos or something."

"Nah," she said, her nose scrunching up for a moment as if she'd bitten something sour. "I looked in there, earlier. If it's not made of metal it costs a small fortune." She shrugged, already back to smiling. "Besides, it shouldn't rain again like that for weeks. Months, probably."

"Thank goodness for that," I said, earning a pleasant laugh from Starlight.

A minute later we headed down. We thanked Mustard for his

hospitality before heading back to the gate. Steel Shot wasn't there, but another pony was, clad in the same metal armor that the other armored guards had worn. With our weapons returned, we stepped out of Rust, and back into the expanse of the Wasteland beyond.

Dusty stood by the side of the gate, a cigarette between his lips. He was certainly geared up; he wore thick cloth barding, a dirty brown, which completely covered his chest and limbs. Thicker patches were sewn over his knees, and a large number of pouches adorned the worn outfit, complemented by a pair of large saddlebags. A holster on his right leg held a pistol, binoculars dangled from his neck, and a rifle that looked very similar to my own was strapped across his back.

When he saw us, he frowned again, took a deep draw, and spit the butt of his cigarette into the dirt. "What, that's it?" he asked. "Not even any barding?"

"We like to travel light," Starlight replied with a smug grin.

"So much for needing the specifics for gearing up," he said, giving Starlight a pointed look that she returned with equal sharpness.

"What specifics?" she said. "All you even know about the place is that it's in the desert. That doesn't tell me anything I need to know to better prepare. I've got good basic gear to cover most common situations, and you'll just have to be happy with that. Or do you want to front the caps for expensive specialist equipment we might not even need?"

Dusty replied with a roll of his eyes. "Your funeral. Just try not to make it mine, too."

He turned and started to walk along the tracks. Starlight took the opportunity to pull a face and mockingly mime a few words behind his back before following along.

Myself, I simply hoped that our little outing would be over swiftly.



Traveling was much easier than our previous day spent in the Wasteland. We still had to trudge through the mud, but there was no rain or howling wind, and the air was a fairly pleasant temperature. Sure, we were quickly muddy up to our knees, but we weren't soaked through and miserable. It was simply an annoyance.

Dusty led the way, eyes scanning around vigilantly, while we followed in silence. I felt some small comfort that he seemed to know what he was doing. It couldn't quite make up for how his presence stifled Starlight's good mood; every time she started to relax, she'd look at him again, and she'd go back to being grumpy.

It was a long walk.

We continued on, even as the sky started to darken. Dusty wanted to get every mile of distance we could out of the day, to make up for time lost to our detour, and I was inclined to agree. The daylight had almost entirely faded when we saw a point of light in the distance, miles away.

The strange thing was, it came not from the ground, but the sky.

The light fell slowly from the clouds, flickering in the darkness. Dusty halted, shaking the mud off his hoof before lifting his binoculars. A moment later he grimaced, ears perking upright.

"What?" I asked, and he lowered the binoculars, eyes still tracking the falling light.

Starlight had unslung her Lancer, peering through the sight. "Oh, shit."

"What?" I asked again. This time, Dusty held the binoculars out to me.

I wiped off a hoof and took them. The light had descended most of the way to the ground, and another had fallen through the bottom of the clouds, casting its flickering light across their underside for a moment before falling away. I lifted the binoculars and sighted in on the second light. It took a few moments, the light flashing across my field of view a few times before I managed to find and track it.

The light was a pony, a pegasus, engulfed in flames and tumbling lifelessly through the air.

"Oh." My voice was barely a whisper as I lowered the binoculars.

A light was growing beyond the clouds, casting a soft, orange glow through them. The clouds started to bulge downward, then split open, a black blade tearing a deep wound in the sky. That blade was a sharp, angular prow, and the orange glow grew brighter as it tore its way free of the clouds. Lightning crackled through the remnants of clouds streaming from its side, and a great fire cast a glow across the Wasteland below as it was freed of the shroud of clouds.

A Raptor. A tremendous war machine, a cloudship, one of Equestria's greatest weapons; there it was, two hundred years later, in its death throes.

I raised the binoculars again. I'd just settled on the prow of the cloudship, with the name *Cumulonimbus* painted across it, when a gout of flame reached out from the clouds, striking the side of the falling ship. Something in the ship burst, exploded, tearing out a section of the ship's side and throwing out flaming debris and shrapnel. A moment later I realized that some of that shrapnel was the ship's crew, maimed or killed by the explosion to join their companions, tumbling toward the ground below.

I lowered the binoculars again, letting Dusty reclaim them. I didn't need to see the gruesome details of the mighty ship's demise. Instead, I watched from a distance as the failing cloud at its side gave one last bright flash of lighting and tore away. The ship's struggle finally came to an end as it rolled over, its descent losing all semblance of control. A couple flashes of light reached up toward the clouds, the doomed ship's gunners defiantly loosing a few final shots toward whoever had struck them down.

Dusty snorted faintly, letting his binoculars rest against his chest again. "Whole damn world's going to shit."

With that, he turned and continued walking. Starlight and I exchanged worried glances before silently following.

It was almost a minute later when the distant, thundering sound of the mighty old-world relic's demise echoed across the Wasteland.

Chapter Five

Friendly Faces

The Enclave.

For once, I was not the only one lacking in knowledge. Starlight hadn't heard that name before, nor did she know anything about what the pegasi had been up to since the war. We both had much to learn as Dusty gave us what details he knew.

After seeing the devastation that had befallen the land, it was hard to believe that there was an entire nation up in the clouds, thriving so far as to still field mighty warships like the one we had seen—dozens of them, according to Dusty, and even several of the tremendous Thunderheads!

I won't lie; I was tempted to abandon the wasteland of mud and misery to fly up to those clouds. It would be far easier to find an abundance of food in a safe, comfortable city in the sky than it would down here, surrounded by raiders and the constant struggle to survive. Still, I had reasons to resist that temptation.

If I were to find any sign of my hive, it would be down here, on the ground. Yes, if my hive still existed, I figured they would probably have Infiltrators up in the clouds, feeding on the ponies that lived up there. That didn't help me. Infiltrators are intentionally hard to find, and even if I did somehow find one, there was a good chance she would not be a *friendly* Infiltrator. If my hive survived, others might have survived as well, and we did not always get along. My path might eventually lead me up above the clouds, but for now it remained below them.

Of course, I could go up there to find food and safety—although the destruction of the Raptor made me question the latter—and return down to the ground once I was more prepared. That would mean leaving Starlight behind, however. If it came down to her or my hive, there was no contest, but between my own comfort and having both a source of food and a potential ally on the ground? That was a much more difficult quandary, but I had the feeling that keeping Starlight would be more beneficial to my mission.

Which was convenient, seeing as I'd feel a little bad about just aban-

doning her. I liked her.

But even if I decided to go above the clouds—not dying to raiders would be even more beneficial to my mission!—there was still one thing that troubled me: the Grand Pegasus Enclave was supposedly a thriving nation, and yet the ponies down on the ground lived in horrific conditions. How much love and safety could I find in a nation that would turn a blind eye to the suffering of their fellow ponies?

Dusty was particularly blunt in his evaluation.

“They’re monsters,” he had said, taking a long drag on his cigarette. “They’re worse than the raiders. The Enclave, they make every single pony in the Equestrian Wasteland suffer because they just don’t give a shit about us. It’d make their cushy little lives a little less luxurious if they had to share with us on the ground. So instead, they just roll up the sky so they don’t even have to look at us. They stole the fucking sun and moon from us!”

He took another drag of his cigarette, scowling.

Starlight’s voice was small. “I saw the sky.”

Dusty’s scowl disappeared as he looked her way. She was looking off into the darkness. “One of those towers exploded,” she said. “This wave of rainbows tore open the clouds, and... and I saw the sun. I’d never seen the sun before.” She smiled, almost dreamily. “And that night, I saw the moon.”

A small smile crept up behind Dusty’s cigarette, and he gave a quiet, sympathetic nod. “I wish I could have seen that.”

“You probably still can,” Starlight said, her smile holding even as she addressed Dusty. “The tower’s gone, and I don’t think the clouds are coming back. It’s just open sky, for *miles*.”

“May have to make my way over there after we’re done,” he said. His smile slipped away, replaced by a more thoughtful look. “Wonder if that’s what kicked the Enclave into making a move.”

When he was met by a questioning look from Starlight, he gave a dry, humorless laugh. “I’m guessing you don’t get the radio this far south if you ain’t heard of the Enclave. Yeah, they finally decided they’re going to get involved. Came down ‘bout a week or two ago. Said they were here to ‘save us’.” He snorted, flicking the butt of his

cigarette away; the glowing ember spun off into the darkness. “So far, their version of ‘saving us’ has been to wipe out every single settlement they can get their hooves on. Fucking butchers, the lot of them.”

Starlight slumped, her ears drooping. “Oh...”

While they were having their little exchange, I listened in horrified silence. It was just... too much. Raiders attacking ponies to steal food at least made some sort of sick, twisted sense, even if it was hard to wrap my mind around. But a nation, living in relative comfort, coming down to the Wasteland and slaughtering the ponies they should be helping? “...How have ponies become so horrible to each other?”

Dusty looked at me. I expected a look of scorn for my naivety. Instead, I saw only sadness in his eyes. The gaze held for just a moment before he looked away, looking much more tired than he had moments earlier. “Wish I knew.”

On that cheery note, we turned in for the night.

Dusty took first watch, leaving Starlight and myself to sleep. It was then that we realized we still had only a single bedroll and blanket between the two of us. While there had been no hesitation before, when the shared bedding was a matter of survival, Dusty’s presence seemed to change the context of the situation for Starlight. I would have found some other course, to spare her the embarrassment of having our situation potentially misinterpreted, but I couldn’t see any way of doing so without one of us spending the night without a blanket.

Well, I could ask to use Dusty’s bedding while he wasn’t using it, but that seemed an entirely different sort of awkward. After working to prove ourselves competent traveling companions, it seemed counter-productive to announce that we had failed to acquire sufficient bedding for the two of us.

Fortunately, despite the blush she was trying to hide, Starlight was still gracious enough to raise the edge of the blanket toward me in a silent offer. I accepted, settling into the slightly too-small bed to sleep as best I could beside the fuzzy ball of awkwardness lying beside me.



We arrived at Gemstone around mid-day, despite Starlight’s attempts to

divert us. “Think of all the salvage!” had been the core of her argument, combined with eager gestures made in the direction we had seen the Raptor falling.

“Think of all the Enclave,” had been Dusty’s retort. “That wreck is going to be crawling. Even if it’s not the Enclave or whoever—or *whatever*—shot it down, every scavenger and raider within fifty miles is going to be saying the same thing you are. They’re all going to go swarming all over it like vultures, and there’s going to be blood.”

“But we could be rich!” Starlight said. “Salvage like that, we’d just need to hold onto it, and we’d be set for life!”

“Sure we would,” Dusty replied. “‘Specially since that ‘life’ would probably be just a few hours.”

“Hey, we can fight!”

“I don’t care if you’re the best damn soldiers in the world,” he said, scowling. “Three ponies ain’t holding against what’s coming down on that, and we don’t want to be anywhere near it when it does.”

Starlight steamed over that for most of the trip, but she did finally relent. The argument that finally seemed to sway her was that, if everypony around was swarming toward the wreck of the *Cumulonimbus*, there would be fewer ponies trying to make their way to Dusty’s claim. It wasn’t a particularly persuasive argument, as I could see it giving more reason why another detour wouldn’t hurt us, but she seemed to accept it.

In more pleasant and personal news, the bandages had worked their magic, and my scrapes had closed up. There was no sign of infection, though my chest still itched if I thought too much on the subject. At least I was free of the bandages. I like to make a good first impression, when possible.

Gemstone was nestled in a particularly rough and rocky patch of land, rising up into a string of jagged hills. An old rail line ran up a shallow slope to the base of what used to be another mining camp. Just beyond that, where the tall, jagged rocks formed a small valley, a wall of wood and steel formed the border of the town.

While still small, the initial impression the town of Gemstone gave was significantly greater than the one Rust had given. Mostly, that was

from their fortifications; while the wall was nothing new or impressive, what was set atop it certainly was. Having considered Rust's heavy machine-gun to be potential overkill, I was at a bit of a loss at how to categorize Gemstone's defenses. The wall was topped by three emplaced magical energy weapons! The one in the middle appeared to be a multi-barrel plasma cannon, of the type one might have seen mounted to a sky-tank, and looking little worse for wear after so many years. The others I did not recognize, looking more hacked-together; they were crude-looking devices of tubes and wires built around large crystals, but I couldn't say they looked any less dangerous to someone who found themselves in their sights.

Several ponies were idling atop the wall, with another visible in a tall tower set behind it. The pony in the tower was the first to see us as we approached the walls. She walked to the edge of her platform, calmly ringing a bell that hung there. It didn't have the sound of an alarm, lacking any sense of frantic urgency. It was less "look out!" and more "hey, come look at this."

The ponies atop the wall milled about, joined by a few more. Each of the three mighty weapons had a pony beside it, with two more ponies posted between them, though they all seemed quite relaxed. Given the amount of firepower they had at hoof, I could hardly blame them.

The earth pony mare by the plasma cannon was leaning casually against her weapon, eyeing us as we drew nearer. She eventually looked back, stomping a hoof and calling out. "Open up!"

With a few dull thumps, the gate slowly swung open. "Come on in," the mare called out, sounding quite congenial despite resting against a giant machine of magical death.

We passed through the gate, into a small town built among the remnants of the old mining structures. Despite the somewhat run-down and pieced-together appearance, the town was refreshingly colorful after our stay in Rust. Somepony had discovered the invention of paint, and applied various colors to different buildings. Strings of lights and a few colorful signs accented the town. Past the mildly decrepit construction and the lingering mud, they gave Gemstone a true appearance of civilization.

And behind all of that, it simply *felt* like a pony town.

The mare who had called out to us hopped down from the wall to join us, landing heavily before offering a pleasant smile. "Welcome to Gemstone. So what brings you three 'round our way?"

Her heavy barding suggested that she was a guard, possibly Gemstone's equivalent of Steel Shot, and the way she shook off the drop spoke well of her physical condition. That was put into strange contrast by her short but elegant purple mane and pristine white coat, both of which looked expertly cared for. She also wore a weapon strapped across her back, a rifle-shaped device made of polished metal and neatly bound wires, with a purple crystal at its core. It was a magical energy weapon, for sure, but not any pre-war design I was familiar with.

In fact, as I looked around, I saw that almost every pony in sight had a similar weapon. They were of different sizes and designs, but they were all similar in the basics of their construction.

"Heard there was a pony here good with energy weapons," Dusty said, taking the lead. "Was hoping to get some repairs done, maybe pick up some supplies."

"You could say that," the mare said with a laugh. "You'd be looking for Arclight, then. He's got the huge workshop right by the mine entrance, can't miss it. Anyway, I'm Dazzle."

She held out a hoof, and after pausing to wipe his own hoof off, Dusty shook it. "I take it you're in charge here?"

"Hah, nah," she said, continuing down the line to shake our hooves as we introduced ourselves. "In charge of the guards, sure, but that's about it. If anypony were in charge, it'd be Arclight or Emerald." She paused to point to the nearest building, with its colorful sign. "Emerald runs the store and inn, you'll meet her if you're looking for supplies. Arclight brings in the trade, but Emerald's kind of become the heart of our town."

For just an instant, Dazzle's expression flashed to one of searching suspicion, but it was gone a moment later as she smiled again. "Why, you looking for some sort of contract work or something?"

"Nothing like that," Dusty said, offering a dry smile that quickly faded away. "Just like to know where I stand. Tend to step on fewer

hooves that way.”

Dazzle gave a soft laugh in reply. “Sounds good to me. If you go stepping on too many hooves, I have to get involved, and that’s a conversation we can both do without.”

Dusty nodded. “Agreed.”

“Well, I’ll get out of your manes and back to my post,” Dazzle said. “It’s a small town, but if you need any help or directions, just flag down a guard or ask around, somepony should be glad to help.”

We parted ways after a quick goodbye, and made our way through town. Dusty left us alone, heading to the store while we headed further into town. Dazzle hadn’t been kidding about not being able to miss Arclight’s place; it was the one pre-war building still standing, some old workshop or warehouse, and easily the largest building in town.

On entering through the front door, we found that the place was absolutely packed with machines, workstations, parts, and several complete weapons. Despite the size and the sheer number of objects within the large space, there was only a single pony within. He was a young yellow unicorn, wearing the kind of head-mounted lenses I associated with jewelers. A loupe, I believe it’s called. It seemed particularly appropriate for him, as at that moment he was examining a pale-blue crystal. He paused in his work to flip up the lens and look our way, and smiled as he saw he had visitors.

“Oh, hello there!” he called out as he stood, working his way through the crowded shop. “I thought I heard the bell. Did you come to do some shopping? Maybe a commission?”

Starlight drew in a slow, deep breath. “Actually, we were hoping to find somepony who could do repairs.”

“Ah, yes! I do tune-ups and repairs as well, especially for my own—”

He staggered to a halt as his eyes fell on the broken weapon Starlight lifted in her magic. His mouth hung open as he sat, gingerly reaching out to take it in his hooves. “Oh,” he said, his voice hushed as he looked over it. “Oh, what happened to you?”

Starlight spoke quietly, as if following his lead. “We were attacked by raiders,” she said. “One tried to take my head off. She hit my gun, instead.”

“Oh.” He looked to her, then back to the gun, nodding. “Well... better it than you, yes. Still...” He gently caressed the weapon’s length with a hoof. “It’s sad to see her in such a state. It’s rare that I get to work on a Lancer. My grandfather did such incredible work on these.”

“Can you fix it?” Starlight asked. I think she was trying to remain still and calm, but I noticed her subtly shifting her balance back and forth in anxiety.

“Maybe,” he said, focusing his attention on the point of damage, with its mangled barrel and crushed-in supports. “The lasing chamber is wrecked, but the damage is all in the housing. That’s the easiest part. Internal damage should be minimal, if any. Yes, I should be able to get her all fixed up.”

Starlight sagged in relief. “Thank you! I don’t have many caps right now, but I’m finishing a job in a couple days, and I should have plenty to pay for any repairs after that.”

Arclight frowned slightly, his eyes still fixed on the weapon. After a few moments of silence, he asked, “You said it was a raider that did this, right?”

Starlight must have noticed the change in tone, as her reply came hesitantly. “Yes?”

He slowly nodded. “In that case... well, I don’t think I’d feel right charging you.” To Starlight’s expression of confusion, he smiled. “My family’s got a policy. Well, several, actually, but the one I’m talking about is that anypony who takes one of our weapons from a raider can bring it here, and we tune and fix it, free of charge. It’s not quite the same, but... close enough, I think.”

“That’s... very generous. Thank you.”

I couldn’t help but note the pause, as if Starlight was searching for some sort of ulterior motive. I couldn’t blame her; weapon crafting never struck me as a terribly altruistic profession.

“My family has always made weapons to protect ponies,” Arclight said. “We don’t like the idea of raiders getting their hooves on our work and using it to hurt the ponies we’re trying to help, so we do what we can to prevent that.”

“And you don’t have problems with people lying about where they

got their weapon to get free repairs?”

Arclight swept several scattered parts off of a workbench, setting the Lancer down and gathering several tools. “Nah. Our weapons aren’t very common, and it’d be pretty obvious if a pony keeps “finding” the same gun. Might happen every once in a while, but I’m not really worried about it.”

Starlight finally smiled. “Well... thank you. That’s a lot more than most ponies would do.”

He shrugged in response, levitating several tools. “It’s just how we are, here. Gemstone’s a nice place. Besides, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to work on one of my grandfather’s Lancers. I might be better at the practical side of making weapons, but I could never match his artistry.”

As he started unscrewing the outer frame, Starlight leaned in, watching intently. She chewed on her lip for a few moments before asking, “How long will it take to fix her up?”

“Hard to say,” Arclight mumbled, eyes fixed on the weapon as he worked. “I’ve got to disassemble everything to see if there’s any internal damage. If there is, those will need repairs or replacement. Then I need to patch up the housing, seal up the chamber. And then it’s the long process of carefully tweaking and aligning everything so it doesn’t vaporize itself when you try to fire.” Detaching the base of the frame, he slowly slid it off, leaving the long barrel exposed. “We’re looking at at least a day of work, maybe two. More if the emitter or lens is damaged, since I’d have to fabricate those from scratch. Nothing I have now would match. These Lancers are pretty amazing, but they’re practically antiques, and incredibly finicky.”

“Oh.” Starlight looked to me. “We can’t wait that long, can we?”

“We can get it on the way back,” I offered.

“Yeah,” she said, though hesitantly. She eyed the partially disassembled Lancer, a hint of that love cropping up once again. “I just don’t like the idea of leaving it behind.”

“You’ll have to leave it with him, anyway. At least this way you won’t be sitting around, waiting for it.”

“At least then I’d be nearby,” she said, but then she shook her head.

“But you’re right. I... I guess we can do the job while we wait.”

Arclight had looked up from his work again. “Is there anything else I can help you with?” He looked to me in particular. “Maybe I could interest you in a better—uh, new weapon?”

“I’m afraid I’m fairly poor at the moment,” I said, “but I may have to take a look at what you have when we get back.”

“I’ll be here,” he said with a smile, though his attention was increasingly distracted by the weapon he was disassembling. I turned to leave, looking back to Starlight. She hesitated a moment longer, heaving a long, deep breath before turning to follow me out.

She remained silent as we walked down the dirt path, her head held low and eyes on the ground. It didn’t take a genius of psychology to tell that this was a big deal to her, or that she might need a bit of comfort and reassurance. “You okay, there?”

Her head snapped back up. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she said, and managed to do a halfway reasonable job of sounding it. “Why?”

I replied with a faint, uneven smile, measured to be gently comforting without seeming insensitive. “You care a lot about your rifle, don’t you?”

She drew her head back, mouth opening. I could see the denial forming, but she stopped herself, and after a moment, she sighed, head drooping again. “It was my mom’s. She gave me most of my stuff, even my pistol, but... but the PipBuck and Lancer were hers.” She swallowed. “They’re just... you know, important to me.”

I slowly nodded in understanding. “I know what you mean.”

Again her mouth opened to reply, a flash of anger crossing her expression. Again she stopped herself, her mouth closing again, and her expression softened again. “...Yeah, I guess you do.”

There was a long moment of silence that followed before she abruptly perked up, putting on a slightly too-large smile. “Anyway! Let’s go get you some saddlebags and stuff!”

I allowed her the sudden change of topic and followed along as she picked up her pace. It was a fairly short walk, and we soon entered the town’s only store.

That’s where we met Emerald.

My first observation of Emerald was that she was green. As in, *excessively* green. She had a light green coat, while her long and flowing mane and tail were dark green. Her eyes matched her mane, as did her cutie mark, which was, as you might have guessed, an emerald.

This all came from a single second of observation as we stepped in the door of the shop to see her standing behind the counter, her forelegs crossed atop it. She was middle-aged, and possibly a bit on the lean side for an earth pony, but only a little. She was also looking right at us, a smile already making its way across her muzzle. “Ah, and you must be Starlight and Whisper,” she said, her voice soft and friendly. “Welcome!”

I should probably note that I have something of a dislike for ponies knowing more about me than I know about them. Dusty must have been talking, and I found myself worrying how much he might have said. I knew it was a mostly irrational fear, as he hardly knew anything about me, but some ingrained reactions can be hard to shake. I shot a glance his way, seeing only his flank as he looked over some goods, before looking back to Emerald.

With my momentary delay, Starlight spoke first. What she said, however, wasn’t a greeting, but an observation. “You have a PipBuck!”

I know that seems like something I should have noticed right away, but in my defense, it had only been a few seconds since I had stepped into the store. And let’s be honest, a pony’s legs are the last place you look when first taking in their appearance. Face, mane, and cutie mark, those are useful identifiers. If anything, I’d trained myself to disregard ponies’ legs. They were useful identifiers for changelings, but not so much for ponies.

As I reconsidered that order of priority, Emerald gave a momentary look of confusion before laughing softly. She had a nice laugh. “Oh! Yes, this old thing. Heck, I’ve had it so long I forget it’s there half the time.” She nodded to Starlight, looking to the PipBuck that hung around her neck. “They’re remarkably useful things, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” Starlight said, nodding in a way that I can only describe as “dumbly”; she was entirely fixated on the other mare’s PipBuck. “Are... are you from a Stable?”

“Oh, no!” Emerald said with a chuckle. “I try to avoid those places. Nothing but trouble in most of them.” She patted the case of her PipBuck. “No, I found this beauty in my days of wandering, back before I settled down here.”

Starlight nodded again, her ears perking up. “You found it? So, um... you had to put it on?” Suddenly, her interest made perfect sense. “Do you have the tools or keys or whatever it is to unlock them?”

She had her hooves on the counter by the end of her question, leaning in with wide, eager eyes. I found myself saddened as Emerald’s expression fell. “Sorry, hon,” she said, giving a lopsided but sympathetic smile as she raised her hoof to show the backside of her PipBuck. “I’m afraid the one I found is kind of different.”

I stared in confusion at what I saw. Instead of the mostly blank plate that I understood to be the underside of a PipBuck, the backside of hers was dominated by a large, heavy latch. For whatever reason, her PipBuck was designed to be easily removed.

Okay, yes, it makes sense to design it that way. Semi-permanently bolting something to your leg always struck me as a poor idea, and I’m pretty sure that’s not simply a changeling’s natural aversion toward permanence. It just seemed more convenient to be able to remove it. If nothing else, I know how much of a hassle proper coat-care can be, and can only imagine how oily and grimy it must get under one of those things after a while.

No, what really bothered me was that I had never heard of Stable-Tec designing another model of PipBuck with a latch instead of a lock. I paid attention to stuff like that. There was never any press announcement or advertisement for such a thing, and if any Infiltrator had heard word of it, it hadn’t come my way. I suspect that meant noling knew of it, as PipBucks were a potential danger to Infiltrators, one we would surely be apprised of. A device that can detect hostile intent is a dangerous and scary thing to one who relies on subterfuge and deception.

That did leave the possibility of it being a post-war modification. Perhaps one of the Stable populations had gotten tired of needing to lock and unlock the things every time somepony wanted to take it off, or even just to transfer one onto a new generation of ponies?

I nearly missed the following conversation as I mentally grappled with how casually I had just thought of the many generations I had missed. Generations that had been born, lived their lives, and died, all while I slept.

While I quietly recovered from that thought, Starlight was withdrawing from her conversation. “Oh,” she said, her hooves returning to the floor, her expression crestfallen. “Uh, thanks anyway.”

Emerald gave her a sympathetic smile. “I can always keep my eye out for a set,” she said. “They’re not common items, but I’m good friends with a lot of traders. One of them might be able to find something.”

That glimmer of hope, as small as it was, was enough to turn around Starlight’s expression. “Thanks,” she said, with much more warmth.

“Until then, is there anything I can help you with?” Emerald’s smile grew. “Need a place to stay for the night? Maybe some shopping?”

“We can’t stay,” Dusty called out from the other side of the store, near a glass counter displaying various types of ammunition. “We’re moving out soon.”

“No on the room, then,” Emerald noted, chuckling softly. “I take it you’re here for supplies?”

“Yes, please,” Starlight said. “Whisper needs some new saddlebags.” Quietly, she added, “Also maybe a bedroll and blanket.”

I’m sure she thought she was being subtle. Unfortunately, the sudden change of volume was more likely to draw Dusty’s attention than it was to cause him to dismiss it. Sure enough, I caught him casting a glance our way.

“Sure thing!” Emerald said with an eager grin, and quickly escorted me over to where a large variety of clothing and wearable items were displayed; despite the somewhat worn-down and generally post-apocalyptic look about the town, she had quite the inventory. Rows of shelves were stocked full of items, all carefully arranged and cared for.

While Starlight said I could get what I wanted, I was very mindful of the price. After a few moments of browsing, I eventually selected a set of small but sturdy canvas bags.

Emerald insisted I try them on, to make sure they fit right. I agreed, unslinging my rifle and setting it aside so I could do so.

I'm not sure which concerned me more about what that simple action said, in regards to the world I found myself in: that a store owner would show absolutely no reaction to one of her customers handling a very lethal weapon in close proximity to her, or that I had done so without even thinking anything of it at the time. Three days seemed far too brief a period of time to have become so accustomed to carrying such a weapon, but I'd taken it off and set it aside as if it were no more significant than a jacket. I really didn't like that.

In any case, Emerald helped strap the bags on. "How's that?" she asked, giving one of the straps a gentle tug. "Are they sitting well? Not too tight around the barrel?"

I rolled my shoulders and swung my hips, testing how the bags sat as I moved. "That's good. It fits perfectly. Thank you."

Emerald grinned upon seeing my smile. "Of course! Now let's see about getting you some bedding."

Soon I had a blanket and bedroll strapped atop my bags, and Starlight bought a few boxes of antique food, rounding out our supplies. Emerald didn't stop there.

"So, any other supplies I could interest you in?" She swept a hoof enthusiastically across the store. "Some ammo? Maybe some barding? It can be pretty rough out there, and I'd really like to see you all again."

She spoke to all of us, but her smile seemed to favor Starlight. I'm not sure if it was because she was the one spending caps, or something else. Starlight appeared to believe it was something else, judging by the awkward expression and ensuing heavy blush. I made a silent mental note of that for possible later use. "I, uh... we're kind of low on caps." She rubbed one foreleg nervously against the other. "Maybe when we get back?" The light of inspiration brightened up her expression, abruptly chasing away her embarrassment. "Actually, we might be coming into a good deal of salvage soon. Is there anything you're looking to buy that we could look for?"

Dusty turned from the display he was looking in. "We're not coming back here. We're getting the stuff, then heading right back to Rust. No more detours."

"We've got to come back here," Starlight replied. "Arclight won't be

done fixing up my Lancer until tomorrow, so unless you're wanting to stay here that long, we're coming back through here. Besides, she might give us better prices for some things."

She quickly looked to Emerald, who had raised a hoof thoughtfully to her chin. "Well now, I don't know what kinds of prices they're paying in Rust, but I can certainly try. I could sell just about anything, especially if it's intact pre-war tech that doesn't need repairs. Other than that, I'll pay top value for any electrical components you might find. Arclight can always use more."

"Ugh, fine," Dusty said, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

"Wouldn't that mean Arclight would pay more?" Starlight asked, as tactless as it was, but Emerald took no offense.

"Nah." She smiled. "It's not like I'd be charging him for the parts I buy off you, so I don't have to buy low and mark it up."

"Wait, you'd just give it away for free?" Starlight tilted her head, looking on with clear skepticism, which drew a laugh from Emerald.

"Of course. Arclight's business is the reason we get so many traders, so anything I can do to encourage that means more business for me." She shrugged. "And besides, I've always had a thing for Kindness and Generosity."

Now there were a pair of words that caught my interest. On their own, they might have just seemed like words, but paired together, and the way she had said them? The Elements of Harmony were heard of less and less as the war progressed, but here was a pony two centuries later, making casual mention of them. It was even more notable to me for being two of the Elements that seemed most alien to the Wasteland. Only Laughter seemed as far removed from what I had seen.

It made me very curious about what had happened to them.

"Pardon me saying so," Dusty said, intruding once more, "but 'generosity' is an unusual trait to find in a businesspony."

Despite his bluntness, Emerald laughed again. "Or most ponies, it seems," she said. "But that's just how we try to be here in Gemstone. We've got a wonderful community, one that knows you don't fight the Wasteland by embracing its ways. You fight the Wasteland by being better than it, by helping each other. Kindness returns kindness."

I've got to say, I really liked the sentiment.

"Be nice if the more ponies thought that way," Dusty said. "Too bad there are so many who'd see kindness as a chance to buck your face in and steal all your stuff."

Emerald's smile turned mischievous. "I'll admit, having an excessive amount of firepower thanks to our local weaponsmith makes the altruism a bit easier." Her expression turned more serious. "But that's all part of my point. Everything we have here is because we decided to work together, instead of just for ourselves. Sometimes that means giving a friend some free supplies or a warm meal. Sometimes it means taking up our guns to protect somepony. Sometimes it even means doing something nice for a stranger. We all do our part to make the world a little bit better for somepony else, and that makes the world a little bit better for us, too."

The mischievous smile returned as she touched a hoof to the display case he had been eyeing, full of bullets. "So, ammo?"

Dusty gave a snort of amusement, but quickly returned to his frowning expression and shook his head. "I'm good for now. I guess we're swinging by again later, so we'll see then." He looked toward Starlight and myself. "How many rounds do you two have?"

"Enough," Starlight quickly replied, which earned her a scowl from Dusty. ■

"Enough' isn't a number."

"Okay, *infinite* then," Starlight shot back, matching his glare.

"Bullshit. How much—"

"Don't 'bullshit' me, you colossal jack—"

"Hey, hey! Calm down," Emerald said as she stepped between the two. She didn't raise her voice, but they both halted. She looked between the two of them. "It's better to talk things out before assuming the worst about each other." Her eyes settled on Starlight, smiling softly. "Could you tell us what you meant?"

"What I meant—" Starlight's angry retort died on her lips in the face of Emerald's gentle smile. When she tried again, she spoke much more calmly. "What I meant was, my pistol doesn't use ammunition."

Dusty blinked. "What?"

I saw Starlight's jaw tighten, but she managed to keep her voice level.

“It’s a Recharger.” Her horn lit, and she slid the pistol from its holster, showing it off. I hadn’t taken a good look at it before, but I studied it then. It was a fairly sleek weapon, with a frame that held three angular barrels, each with a blue crystal at its base. A thick cylinder extended a hoof’s width from the rear, and I could see various wires snaking out from it, all nestled neatly behind the crystals. “It’s got a miniature spark generator or something. Holds about twenty or so shots, and it slowly recharges them.”

“Huh,” was Dusty’s initial reply, which was rather more mild than my own response.

“That’s quite impressive,” I said, earning a smile from Starlight. Possibly more impressive since I’d never heard of a pre-war weapon that did so. It did lead me to question why, however. All the pieces were there. Small spark generators were uncommon and fairly expensive, but the military seemed to spend so much money that I could hardly imagine it being a drain on its resources.

“How long does it take to recharge?” Dusty asked.

“A few minutes.”

He looked as if he were about to say something more, but his eyes darted Emerald’s way, and he quickly turned to me instead. “How about you? How much ammo do you have?”

“Thirty six rounds,” I said, feeling fairly happy that I could give an exact number. Unfortunately, that number produced a grimace from Dusty.

“Thirty six rounds for an automatic pipe rifle,” he grumbled. “Yeah, she’ll need more ammo.”

“‘She’ can’t afford more ammo,” I said, staring back at him.

“You can afford it a lot more than you can afford dying because you ran out in the middle of a fight,” Dusty replied, fixing me with a glare.

“That won’t do me any good if I can’t afford to eat.”

Emerald cut in again. “I think I can solve those problems for you.” When we looked to her, she smiled. “You’re coming back through here for the gun she’s getting fixed up, right?”

We nodded, even though it seemed a rhetorical question.

“So how about this: I can lend you some spare ammo for your trip,

and when you get back you can pay for it then, or just return it if you didn't need it. Sound good?"

I blinked, staring at her smiling face for a couple seconds. Dusty was staring at the back of her head with a deeply suspicious expression. I have to admit, I immediately felt the urge to be suspicious of her motivation as well, but I couldn't see any tangible way that she could take advantage of us by giving us free ammunition.

That didn't mean it wasn't there, just that I couldn't see it. The closest I came was the possibility that she planned on ingratiating herself with us in hopes of influencing us in the future, but that posed no meaningful threat when I could simply say "no".

That, or she was truly genuine in her embracing of Kindness and Generosity.

"That's very generous," I said, smiling softly. "Thank you."

"Of course," she said, her smile brightening just a bit more before turning back to the ammo display and opening it. "Half-inch pipe rifle, is it?"

"Uh..." I had no idea, but I did know that "close enough" wasn't exactly a thing where firearm ammunition was concerned. I glanced helplessly at Dusty, who rolled his eyes and nodded. "Yes," I said. "Yes it is."

She started plucking items out of the case, while Dusty stared at me. He stared long enough that I was starting to get concerned, when he abruptly walked over to me and grabbed the barrel of my rifle.

I objected, but he replied calmly. "Oh, settle down. I'm just looking."

I was *not* happy with him tugging on an extremely lethal device strapped to my back. Neither was Starlight, whose "Recharger" pistol was again hovering beside her. Still, I restricted my reaction to merely glaring at him. "You could have asked."

"Yeah, I could have," he said, pulling the barrel of the rifle around to look into the muzzle, though he had the sense to look into it from an angle rather than staring straight down the barrel. He frowned at what he saw, though it was a more thoughtful expression than a disapproving one. Finally, he released the barrel. "Well, at least you got one with rifling."

"It's not like I had much selection," I said, grumpily shrugging my shoulders to get the heavy weapon to rest comfortably again. "And seriously, ponies make *rifles* without *rifling*? That's kind of an important part of a *rifle*."

"Yeah, it is," Dusty said. "But it's also harder to do, so when ponies make cheap-ass weapons like yours, it tends to get skipped over."

You know, I might not particularly *like* the big, cumbersome, obnoxiously un-subtle weapon I was carrying, but I dislike hypocrisy even more. Despite that, I laced my voice with only a *little* bit of irritation. "You've got the same kind of gun I do."

Dusty turned away, a growl entering his voice. "Not by choice."

I wasn't entirely sure how to reply to that, as there was clearly something going on that I wasn't quite seeing. I was distracted from him when I saw Emerald had finished rooting around, and three fresh and fully loaded magazines were sitting atop the counter. "Here," she said, patting them with a hoof. "Might want to make sure they fit right. You never really know with that kind of gun."

It was a reasonable concern. Standardized measurements in manufacturing probably went out of style with the bombs. I unslung my rifle again. While I busied myself with making sure the magazines all fit correctly in the weapon, Emerald turned to Dusty. "So, what happened?"

He looked back over his shoulder. "What?"

"'Not by choice' makes it sound like something bad happened," she said, her voice soft and comforting. Inviting.

He considered her, face contorting to a scowl, but it slowly relaxed. After a few moments of silence under her attention, he relented. "There was a pony I worked with, a while back. It's always good to have somepony watching your back, right? Working together, and all that." He snorted in disgust, looking away again. "We just finished a big job, one that would have set us nice and comfy for a good while. Fucker stabbed me in the back. Took all the caps and my rifle, and just split."

Emerald nodded, silently.

Starlight's reaction was far from silent.

"What a dick!"

We all looked over to her. She stood wide-eyed and incredulous, and quickly turning toward anger. "You don't know where he is, do you?"

"No," he said, though hesitantly. "Why do you care?"

"Why?" she asked, as if surprised to be asked that question. "Because... because! You just don't do shit like that!"

He grunted. "Yeah, well, they did."

"Well *I* kind of want to kick his stupid flank," Starlight said.

"Sorry, I've got dibs on it," Dusty said. I even saw a hint of a smile trying to make its way past his grimace. It didn't last long as he quickly changed the subject. "Now if you two are done shopping, let's go."

He paused long enough to thank Emerald, then walked out of the store. I tucked the three gifted magazines into the pouch with the other one, and adjusted its strap so it sat across my shoulder instead of hanging from my neck. Meanwhile, Starlight paid for our acquisitions with a large part of our—and by that, I mean *her*—caps.

Oh, yes. I believe that was when I found out what caps really were. I'll spare you the lengthy ranting I could probably level at that discovery. Suffice to say, there were many things about this new world that I found to be strange, and the idea that ponies would use bottlecaps for currency was well up there on the list.

I refrained from making comment of it, and soon we headed out to rejoin Dusty, who was waiting just outside. It was a short walk to the gate, and we left with a wink and a wave from Dazzle, still lounging beside her cannon.

As we walked off past the remnants of the mining camp below the town, I couldn't help looking back at Gemstone. I still had concerns that there was something seedy lurking under the surface. After the horrors I had seen since waking up, that concern was hardly unjustified, but those experiences were limited. They comprised only a couple days and a single settlement. Gemstone seemed like a genuinely nice place. There was love there. Despite the guns that adorned their walls and the armaments they produced, there was a sense of peace and happiness that had become uncommon during the war. It gave me a small glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, the Wasteland wasn't quite as bad as I had been led to believe.

That hope didn't last long.



“How bad is it?”

Dusty grunted, peering through his binoculars. It was still fairly early in the morning by the time we reached the sandy ridge we were lying upon. Out in the flat and empty basin beyond, perhaps a mile away, was the depot Dusty had guided us toward. That, and a fair bit more.

“Bad,” Dusty said, passing the binoculars my way.

I took them, bracing against a rock for stability; despite the relatively short walk and the night's rest, my legs were still quite unhappy with the workload I'd given them lately. I peered through the binoculars, my view swinging around until I finally found what I was looking for.

Even with the binoculars, I couldn't make out all the fine details at such a range, but I didn't need to. The recent construction was perfectly obvious.

The perimeter was lined with a chain-link fence that had been reinforced or patched in several places with scrap. What had once been a wagon shelter had partially collapsed, but fabric hung from the remaining parts to form simple shelters, swaying in the light breeze. A rope bridge ran from a patched-up watch tower to the roof of a warehouse, where a few more crude structures had been built. Just beyond the warehouse was a line of railway tracks, with a second line running along the loading dock of the warehouse. The most significant construction was a haphazard wall, anchored by the watchtower at one end and the fence at the other, with a large gate in the middle. It was nothing compared to the gates of Rust or Gemstone, but that hardly mattered. Somepony had found our claim.

In front of that gate was an object that I thought might have been a pony. On scrutinizing it in the binoculars, I came to the horrified realization that I was close. It was *most* of a pony. Specifically, a dismembered and decapitated torso, impaled on a pole. Several dark birds appeared to be gathered around, presumably feeding on it.

I passed the binoculars back, not needing to see further details of

that. “So... raiders?”

“Probably,” Dusty replied, taking his binoculars back. He continued to silently scan over the depot.

I watched as well, though there was little I could make out from so far away. “So... that’s it, then? We’re not planning on fighting a bunch of raiders, are we?”

“No, we’re not.” He continued to watch the compound. “I don’t think we’ll have to.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that,” I said, giving him a concerned look.

“The sound of what?” Starlight called up to us. She was watching our rear, at Dusty’s insistence, and was sitting a ways back from where we lay. It occurred to me that meant she had no idea about the torso-pony.

“I’m not seeing any ponies,” Dusty said. “No pony’s manning the lookout posts, and I haven’t seen any movement inside the fence. I *do* see two... maybe three bodies. Plenty of crows, too. It looks like whoever it was got hit.”

“I’m liking the sound of this even less.”

“What do you mean, bodies?” Starlight asked.

“The depot has dead ponies in it,” Dusty called back.

“And we have no idea who killed them,” I added.

“But whoever it was seems to have moved on.” He mulled the situation over for a moment before making a decision. “We need to get a closer look. If they really have cleared out, we could still find a lot of salvage.”

I frowned. Even if everything he said made sense, I disliked the idea of getting closer to the depot of death. Still, I had to admit I agreed with him. In fact, I’d much rather take the chance and scope it out rather than stay away due to personal risk. The risk was there either way; our supply of caps was rapidly dwindling, and we were unlikely to find another prospect so promising on our way back. The life of an Infiltrator often demands risks, and he *was* just proposing a scouting run.

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “We should be careful, though.”

“Of course,” Dusty said, lowering the binoculars. “You see that

streambed off to the left of the depot?”

After a moment, I found what he was talking about: a shallow crevice in the ground, only a few feet lower than the terrain around it and snaking slowly off to our left. “Yeah, I see it.”

“That’s our approach. It should keep us in defilade to anypony on the ground most of the way there. The last hundred yards will be in the open, but we can scout it out before crossing.”

I nodded again.

“Scoot back,” he said, and we shuffled backwards until we were out of sight of the depot. Keeping low, we crept back to Starlight. “Let’s see that map.”

Starlight levitated her PipBuck out between us, flipping over to the map screen. After zooming in, Dusty pointed to it. “Okay, there. That stream on the northwest side of the compound? It hooks around this high ground just to our north. That’s our entrance. It’s also our primary exit. The ground around the compound is barren with almost no cover, so if we have to retreat, we want to go that way. Once we make it to the streambed, we can either retreat back north, or continue on south.”

“Makes sense,” Starlight said, though she seemed reluctant to admit it. I merely nodded.

“If you see anypony, you’re only to fire if they see us, and either have a weapon pointed at us or are shooting at us. Anything else, you wait for my word before shooting.” He looked around at us, his expression sharp and deadly serious. “Understood?”

“Sure,” Starlight said. I nodded once more.

Dusty continued to stare at her for a second before speaking again. “Just remember, that was part of the deal. Until we’ve cleared the entire compound, this is a combat zone. That means you need to do exactly what I say, when I say it. No questions asked or second-guessing, no improvisation, just following orders. You got that?”

“Yeah,” Starlight said, with only the faintest hint of bitterness. “It’s your show. I got it.”

The twitch of his jaw was subtle, but I could tell he’d caught that tone. He decided not to press the matter, though. “Okay. Check and

ready your weapons.” He pulled his own rifle around to hang from his neck, in easy reach, and pulled back the bolt. I did the same. Starlight merely looked at us both with a bored expression, her pistol hovering beside her.

Dusty nodded. “I’ll lead. Starlight, you’re on me. Whisper, you’re bringing up the rear. Let’s move out.”

With the first tingles of adrenaline playing at the edge of my senses, we started to walk.

Chapter Six

Carrion

I was not a soldier.

That's not to say I was entirely averse to violence or danger. I had often idly pondered what it would be like to conduct assassinations, or even to have served in a commando group. They were entertaining fantasies. If I were selected to play such a role in the hive, I would have done so willingly, happy to contribute to the well-being and security of the hive. My preferences, however, lay along a different course.

To an Infiltrator, violence is a tool. A particularly extreme and unsubtle tool, but a tool all the same. Usually the screwdrivers and pliers and micrometers are the best tools for the job, but sometimes you just have to break out the hammer.

To a soldier, violence is a method. *The* method. Their tools are focused on applying the proper form of violence most efficiently, but a soldier's role revolves around violence. I don't intend that as a criticism of soldiers, as violence (Or just as frequently, the threat of violence) can solve problems that more subtle means may be unsuited for. I had been given a very stark example of that truth. I am not so conceited as to assume those who walk a different path are inferior to myself. I may prefer to avoid violence when possible, but I recognize that is not always possible. Soldiers have their place, perhaps now more than ever.

As for danger and the threat of death, I am familiar with those things. It may have been in quite different contexts, but it was there all the same. Every single action taken within Equestria was done with a lingering background concern, worrying that a minor misstep might leave the clues some clever pony needs to piece together the hidden truth. When the Ministry of Morale comes for an Infiltrator, death is generally the *preferable* outcome. We learned to evaluate our actions through reason, rather than emotion, because the most natural emotion was that of fear.

The difference in context, however, was everything. While an Infiltrator was faced with an ever-present low-level danger, the lives of

soldiers were often punctuated by moments of extreme danger. While Infiltrators had a great deal of ability to control what dangers they faced, soldiers often did not have that freedom. As an Infiltrator, the typical course was to avoid danger as much as was reasonable. To put it somewhat disparagingly, if an Infiltrator came across something particularly dangerous, the general recourse was to run away from that danger.

Soldiers were expected to run *toward* it.

The chill of adrenaline continued to course through my veins as we moved down the shallow gully. It teased at my nerves in a way I hadn't experienced since my first time slipping into a pony settlement, under the watchful eyes of one of my instructors. I was going into the unknown, in a situation that was likely to demand largely untested skills. There remained the distinct possibility that I would have to stake my life on skills I had no experience to accurately judge.

We paused for a moment where the streambed neared the depot. It was not as dry as I had initially assumed from a distance. A tiny trickle of water still remained from the torrential downpour. The ground was muddy, but I kept myself crouched low. Dusty had me watching our rear this time, while he and Starlight observed the depot once more.

We were there for less than a minute when he whispered around the bit of his gun. "Follow me." He rose up, advancing toward the crude wall. He moved at a swift walk, barely below a trot, and with so little bounce to his step that he seemed to practically flow across the ground. His gun unerringly tracked the gate.

Our path led us directly past the torso-pony, giving me a clear view of the grisly scene.

I can't really say it was the first time I had seen a dead pony. That first time, however, had been a fleeting glimpse while scrambling for my life, obscured by heavy rain and lit only by the weak light of a PipBuck screen. This time it was in the broad light of day, searing the image into my memory in every gruesome detail.

I don't like lingering on such things, but this was the first time I got such a clear view of the sort of atrocities that take place in the Wasteland. Though I had no idea who this pony had been, that made it feel important to me. Horrible, but important.

The remains were in a far worse state than I had originally thought, looking at it from a distance. The pony hadn't just been dismembered and decapitated, but disemboweled as well. The gaping space that had once been a belly showed that the body was hollow and empty inside, letting us see the pole that ran through the vacant cavity. It was a pipe, with a jagged blade welded to one end to form a spear, and the other end buried in the ground. It had been inserted through the groin, up through the torso, and out through the neck. A bone had been lashed to the pole just beneath the pelvis, keeping the grotesque display suspended.

A few tattered clumps of purple were the only sign of the pony's coat, giving just a hint of the once-colorful pony it had been. The rest of the hide had been torn away, as had most of the meat. The ragged flesh, ruddy brown from decay, clung to the bones. The pony's limbs were scattered around it, half-buried in the ground where they had sunk into the mud, only for the ground to dry up around them. Flies filled the air with buzzing, while several crows picked over the remains. One of the crows paused in plucking at the remains of the pony's neck to caw angrily at us as we passed by.

I hurried past, gagging at the horrific stench of rotting flesh, one that brought back far too vivid and painful of memories. In a more calm moment, I might have stopped and retched. Instead, I pushed on, riding the mounting adrenaline to safety.

We paused at the gate, which was opened just enough for a pony to pass through. Dusty crept up to the corner, halting a few feet from the opening. He placed a hoof under the barrel of his rifle, holding it in place as he released it to look back at us.

Once we had gathered up, he gripped his rifle again, and moved through the gate.

Immediately on the other side was another corpse, and our entrance scared off the crows that had been feeding on it. I avoided looking closely at it; my attention was instead focused on the ruins of the wagon shelter, where the hulks of dead vehicles and hanging cloth of shelters gave many places for some hostile pony to hide. The space beyond the gate was an open field, bordered by the warehouse and wagon shelter, a wide

space with no cover.

Dusty moved the other way, toward the warehouse that dominated the depot. It was a large sheet-metal building with no windows. A pony-sized door hung from one hinge. Further down the wall, the large loading-bay doors were wide open, showing the collapsed racks and scattered boxes within. He again paused just short of the pony-sized door, waiting for us to draw close, then moved in.

The warehouse was huge, and the boxes and towering shelves gave me the terrifying feeling of being watched from a hundred different places at once. That feeling was enhanced by the dimness, as the entire space was lit only by the open doors and a few holes in the huge roof. Just to make the scene even more unsettling, we were immediately confronted by another corpse.

Being somewhat sheltered by its location, this body was less decayed, but possibly more gruesome for it. He—for I think it was a stallion, despite the most identifying parts having been torn away—lay on his back atop a table, split open. A pair of deep gashes paralleled each other down his chest, cutting through the last few ribs before opening into the cavity that had been his belly. His torn-open barding hung from his body, stained dark. What entrails remain lay strewn about the table and dangling off the side, while dried blood coated the surface and left a discolored circle on the ground. Only a few patches of off-white coat were left unstained.

I didn't know a pony contained that much blood. Conceptually, sure, but it was shocking to see demonstrated so clearly.

Just to cap off the horror-show, his neck was a mess of torn meat. His head was missing. I found that discovery to be particularly unsettling. An all new feeling of horror started to bubble up in the background.

Dusty hadn't hesitated for even an instant. He moved forward along the front end of the warehouse, his rifle tracking each aisle of shelves as he moved across it. I followed as the number of possible hiding spots rapidly dwindled.

We reached the end of the warehouse, exiting through the loading docks, and moved toward the ruins of the wagon shelter.

The hulk of a ruined skywagon formed a wall for the area, with several spans of canvas dividing the space beneath the tilted shelter roof. Despite the ruined conditions, it almost looked like it could have been a pleasant place in different conditions. The simple, airy shelter the fabric provided seemed ideal for desert living.

That was ruined by the pair of corpses lying around the entrance. One lay entangled and half suspended in the canvas that had once formed part of a shelter, forelegs crushed and contorted, with the handle of a machete protruding from the shredded remains of what had once been a neck. The other was sunk chest-first into the dirt just off the concrete pad, spine laid bare while crows plucked meat from the pony's ragged back. Both were missing their heads.

Dusty slowed as he approached the shelter. After peering in, his gun sweeping around as he checked the nearby area, he drew back to the entangled pony. I crouched next to him, looking for any sign of movement within the canvas-enshrouded space..

Keeping his gun leveled, Dusty reached out to pull on the canvas. It took a couple of tugs before it pulled free and the body flopped limply to the ground. Partially protected by the fabric, it was the most intact of the corpses we had found. I could see clearly that it had been a wiry mare, with a ragged pale-blue coat and a short red tail. She wore barding, with a heavy metal plate encircling her chest, but it hadn't helped her. The side of the armor was caved in, mangling her chest, and from the way she flopped and twisted to the side in a most unnatural fashion, I was guessing the blow had broken her spine.

Just in case the place hadn't been delivering enough disturbing content, her cutie mark consisted of a pony skull with a knife driven into the top of it.

Cutie marks could be a terrifying concept at the best of times, but that mark brought an all new level of concern. It left me wondering what kind of horrific special talent that mare had once possessed. I would have questioned how a pony could even discover such a talent, but that day had already provided me an ample answer to that question.

For a moment, it seemed as if Dusty took comfort in that cutie mark. He relaxed a little, his posture softening, though he kept his gun

ready. "They were raiders," Dusty said. "Looks like someone killed them all and took off. We should be clear, but keep an eye out, just in case."

"They took all their heads," Starlight said, tearing her eyes away from the face-down corpse to glance my way.

"They were probably hit by some other band of raiders," Dusty said, relaxing further and standing tall as he slowly looked around. "Raiders love taking trophies."

"Yeah, I know," Starlight said. "It's just, I think we ran into the raider who did this."

He looked her way. "Oh?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Just a few hours away from Rust. Some giant of a mare in full metal armor, hauling a bag of heads."

Dusty's head drew back in surprise. "Oh, shit. You met Sickie?"

I stepped in. "As I doubt there's another mare of similar size and attire, I'm going to assume, it seems so."

Dusty stared at me for a few seconds, mulling that over. "Huh," was all he said at first, but eventually shook his head and looked around again. "Yeah, that'd explain the mess. She's a nasty one. Guess I'm not surprised she'd take trophies."

Starlight snorted. "Yeah, probably decorating her little shithole with them." Despite the angry tone, I could see her shudder.

"What shithole?" Dusty asked, looking to her with a questioning look. "You saw her home?"

"We were *in* her home."

His eyes widened, and I quickly clarified. "It was in the middle of that storm and getting dark. We thought it was abandoned, so we took shelter there. She got there a couple hours later to find us there."

"Shit," he said. "How'd you manage to get away from her?"

"We didn't exactly get away," I said. "It was more like she grabbed us and threw us out. Well, threw me into a wall and *then* out." I rubbed my chest, where she had pinned me to the wall. "She wasn't very nice about it."

"No shit," Dusty said, though he sounded more surprised than condescending. "I've got to say, I would have expected her to kill you."

Like I said, I've only met her a couple times, but she always struck me as excessively violent."

"We did just come out of a day-long storm," I said. "We were soaking wet and exhausted. It would have been hard to look much more pathetic."

Dusty stared at me with a lopsided expression the clearly communicated how utterly stupid he thought I was. "You don't know a fucking thing about raiders if you think that's going to stop anypony." He shook his head and turned away, moving to the entrance. "Come on. Check out the rest of this shelter, see if there are any survivors or salvage, then we search the warehouse. Hopefully we can get something out of this disaster."

Starlight and I shared a quick glance, and followed him in.

The raiders' living space was in shambles. Tables were turned over, bedding was shoved aside, and containers lay open and ransacked. A severed foreleg lay in the middle of a walkway, reduced to tattered strings of flesh clinging to bones. The matching body was in the next room, deposited in a box. His hindlegs stuck out over the edge. One ended in a stub, the lower leg having fallen to the ground when the scavengers tore away the tendons. A crow stood on the other, picking at the intact knee. It interrupted its meal to caw at us, as if warning us away.

We left the crow to its meal and continued on.

I can not emphasize too strongly just how awful the place was. The grotesque remains, the choking stench of decaying ponies, the ever-present buzzing of flies, and the crows picking away at the bodies. It was a horrorshow, beyond anything I had ever imagined. I struggled against my own stomach as it rebelled, trying to purge itself. I breathed through my mouth in an attempt to avoid the stench, despite how awkward that was with my rifle's grip clenched between my teeth. It only did so much; I could *taste* the decay in the air.

Then there was the occasional scene that seemed to transcend mere violence, rising to the level of outright sadism. One sleeping area had a corpse suspended from the wagon-shelter's supports by a length of rope, hanging by one hind leg while the other limbs dangled at awkward angles. The pony had been disemboweled, though I couldn't be sure if

it had been by this Sickle pony or the scavengers that came afterward. The bed he was suspended over was stained entirely black with blood.

But for all that, for all the carnage and decay, there were two that stood out above the rest. One was the first, the torso-pony posted like a warning sign of what lay beyond those gates.

The second was a young colt.

Even Dusty paused as we came across that scene. The small pony's body lay crumpled, chest-down atop a heap of blood-stained canvas, surrounded by shards of broken wood and an overturned table. I would guess the pony at around ten, maybe twelve years, though I was never all that good at guessing ponies' ages. That was made harder by his body being misshapen, his ribs crushed in so severely that several had punctured out of his back.

The nearby wall, made of wood that looked to have once been crates, had a ragged hole broken through it; it was easy to picture the monstrous pony I remembered, throwing the colt's tiny body through that wall. The difference in size struck me as monumentally unfair to the poor colt.

And of course, he was missing his head as well. The ragged tatters of meat and the glint of exposed spine made it look like it had been torn away rather than cut.

Dusty was the first to approach, and placed a hoof against the colt's side to roll him onto his side. I looked away the moment I realized his intentions, but not quickly enough to miss the way part of the young pony slopped out as his belly parted. The sickening wet sound made my stomach twist again, and the air was promptly filled with the buzzing of flies as their meal was disturbed.

"Another raider," Dusty said, without any apparent remorse. I looked back to see what had drawn that conclusion. Then I saw the colt's cutie mark; an eyeball, impaled on a thin blade.

I walked out, past all the blood and corpses, until the stench no longer filled my nose. I sat there in the dirt field, slowly breathing in and out. I sat there, still, despite the way my limbs tried to tremble. I tried to focus on how I should just overlook it, how this was all in the past and nothing I could do would affect it. It didn't help much.

A minute later, Starlight and Dusty emerged. Starlight looked miserable, and as she stepped out she coughed a couple times before spitting into the dirt. She looked close to vomiting. I could sympathize. I'm honestly amazed that I managed to hold it in the whole way through.

Dusty looked grim, but undisturbed.

Actually, a correction: while he looked undisturbed upon leaving the shelter, the expression soon turned to one of disapproval as he looked at us. "Not as fun as you imagined, is it?" He snorted softly. "If you really want to be some hot-shot merc, you better get used to it. That's what combat looks like."

"What, sticking ponies on pikes and hanging them from the rafters?" She shot him a glare, pointing a hoof back at the shelter. "That isn't combat. That's... something else."

"It's on the bad side, but death is never pretty." He gestured the way she was pointing before walking on. "You kill a pony, that's what you leave behind. Just keep that in mind."

I think Starlight wanted to argue the point further, but she didn't have any fight left in her. She instead spit again, pausing for a few moments to suck in the cleaner air. She waited there beside me as Dusty continued on, heading around the ruined wagon shelter. Eventually, she looked my way. "I guess we should get on with the salvage, huh?"

I nodded, taking another deep breath, and hauled myself up to my hooves. We weren't done yet.

Fortunately, we didn't come across any more bodies. We did come across the wreckage of another skywagon, its frame twisted and half covered by the collapsed shelter. The remaining metal curled away from the body, with a gaping hole where the front had been. If I had to offer a guess as to its demise, I would have to say that the spark battery had ruptured and exploded. The only question I had was whether it was a consequence of the shelter collapsing upon it, or the cause.

On the far side of the shelter, a motorwagon was parked on a bare patch of pavement. It was an unusual find, I thought. Motorwagons were uncommon even before the end of the world, as the few factories capable of producing such vehicles instead spent their effort on producing tanks for the Equestrian army. Even those were few in number.

Two hundred years had worn on the vehicle, but had not destroyed it. That looked to have come much more recently. The panel over the mechanical innards of the vehicle lay open, with many parts removed. Several tool sets lay around. The raiders had been working on it, but even though my knowledge of motorwagon engineering was practically nonexistent, I was fairly certain they were doing it wrong.

Starlight was even less impressed. "What the fuck," she muttered, approaching the open panel to peer inside. I could hear her angry muttering continuing, growing in both vehemence and incredulity by the moment.

Dusty checked out the tool sets while asking, "How bad is it?"

"These ponies had no idea what the hell they were doing!" Starlight shouted, her head still stuck within the motorwagon's body. "This casing is pristine, but... shit, they just tore out these wires. Half these gears are stripped. Look, the metal's all clean there where they broke it. That was recent. And... and for fuck's sake, did they use a cutting torch on the transmission? They... they..."

She sputtered and fumed for several seconds before pulling back. "Damnit!" she shouted, slamming a hoof against the side of the vehicle. "This thing was probably a minor tune-up from running, and these raiders gutted it like—"

She swept her hoof back to the shelter, and the anger immediately drained from her. Her hoof dropped to the ground. After a moment, she sighed. "Too bad. Would have been quite the prize, huh? This thing would probably be worth a small fortune if it worked."

"Or a large one," Dusty said, frowning as he looked over it. "Doubt there are more than twenty motorwagons still running, and most of those are in Trotsen. Heard a merchant ask one of their caravaners how much they'd sell one of their wagons for. I didn't bother remembering how much they said, I just remember thinking that I'd never see that many caps in my life."

Starlight sat with a weary huff. "Shit."

"You seem to know a little about machines," Dusty said, which I think might have been the nicest thing he had said to her at that point in time. "Any chance you can fix the damage?"

“Oh, hell no,” Starlight said, weakly kicking the side of the wagon. “I can kludge together simple stuff and do basic repairs and cleaning, that’s all basic scavenger stuff. This? This is insane. They tried to cut the transmission casing open to get at the internals, but managed to cut into the feed from the spark battery! Somehow, they *didn’t* blow themselves sky high, but they *did* dump the entire battery’s charge into the engine. The transmission is nothing but a lump of fused metal. I’m surprised the whole damn engine didn’t just pour out into a puddle!”

“And those are the parts that can’t be replaced,” Dusty finished for her. “Shit.”

In hindsight, it seems strange to me that we should linger there, silently mourning the death of a machine when there were so many dead ponies there. Strange, and a little concerning that I might have been subconsciously avoiding anything that would lead me to thinking about the death all around me.

“We should check the warehouse,” Dusty said, turning to head that way. “Hopefully we can find something to make this trip worth the time.”

“Yeah,” Starlight said, banging a hoof one last time on the motor-wagon before turning to follow. “Cause, no offense Dusty, but this claim of yours is looking kinda shit so far.”

Dusty grimaced, but otherwise seemed to agree. “At least somepony killed off all the raiders before we got here.”

“I’m not sure if I count that as a good thing,” Starlight grumbled. “Cause I kinda want to kill them myself, now.”

Dusty snorted. I caught a faint suggestion of amusement in the sound and curl of his lips, but he hid it well from Starlight.

As for myself, I couldn’t help but note Starlight’s use of humor as a coping mechanism. I think that’s what jolted me out of the numb stupor I had descended into. Sure, she had the advantage of having years to become familiar with the Wasteland, even though I had no idea if she’d ever experienced anything remotely like this, but I was an Infiltrator. I’d been trained, extensively, to work in stressful situations, and I was failing to uphold the expectations put upon me.

I took another deep breath, mentally shaking off the death and

destruction. I had to focus on analyzing the situation with clinical detachment. I had to carry on, despite my fears. The fact was, I was not in imminent danger. What surrounded me was not a threat, and it was not time-critical. I could step back and think, rather than worry.

The true horror of the Wasteland did not lie in the carnage around me. They were just a symptom. The true horror was the the reason *for* that carnage; the motivations that had led to this and other atrocities. And motivations, those were something I could handle. My profession was all about motivations, and in shaping and manipulating them. I might not know or understand the motivations that could lead to such a grotesque excess of violence, but I could *learn*.

In a way, it turned the scene around me into a puzzle. A morbid one, but it was still something I could grasp and understand. There was some comfort in that.

We entered the warehouse, with its many shelves and crates. Entering from the loading dock, the first thing I noticed was the elevated office above where we had first entered. It was likely a manager's office, with its commanding view over the warehouse floor. The catwalk leading to it had collapsed in the middle, leaving the office stranded, like an island in the air.

Starlight came to the same conclusion I had. "Looks like an office," she said, and started to trot its way. "I'll go check it out."

"Anypony seen a ladder?" Dusty asked, but Starlight simply let out a short laugh.

She turned, leaping atop a box, then scrambled up the side of a twenty-foot-high shelf. From there it was a casual hop to the next shelf, right below the catwalk. She leaped up, catching the edge with her forehooves, then flipped her hindquarters around to hook a hindleg over the edge and pull herself up.

She paused just long enough to shoot a smug grin our way before disappearing into the office.

"Okay," Dusty said, his head tilted to one side. "That... was actually kind of impressive."

I managed a weak chuckle as we turned to look over the contents of the shelves. For the most part, it was a few hundred identical crates,

all stamped with Stable-Tec logos. A couple were already opened, presumably by the ponies that now lay dead. Apparently they had been unhappy with the crate of Stable jumpsuit uniforms, and had used that crate as a latrine. The box full of pipe ends and joints were unsullied, a fact which failed to provoke any enthusiasm from either of us.

As we worked, I considered Dusty's comments on Starlight. It was possibly the nicest thing he had said about her, as sad as that was. Despite how vile and depressing the place was, it presented an opening; seeing as we were only halfway through our little endeavor, I hoped I could encourage a more friendly atmosphere between them.

So as we continued looking into already-opened crates, I spoke with him. "Hey, Dusty?"

He looked over. "Hmm?"

I paused in my fruitless search, turning to address him. I gave a weak smile, mixing in just a hint of feigned awkwardness; it's amazing how much that can soften a pony's reactions. "Well... I know you and Starlight have kind of butted heads a fair bit, but she means well. I don't think she means to be abrasive, it's just that she's outgoing and used to being friendly with ponies. I, uh... I get why you might not be all that trusting of other ponies, but it comes across as a little rude at times."

"I'm not here to make friends," he said, turning to move to the next box.

"I know," I said, as placatingly as I could. "And I'm not asking you to trust us, at least any more than you need to for us to work together. I'm just saying that you don't need to drive ponies away to do that."

He hooked a hoof over the edge of the next open crate, casting a glare my way. "What, are you a psychologist, now?"

"Not professionally," I said, my smile growing just a touch, and throwing in a weak chuckle for good measure. "I just listen to ponies. You seem like a very nice and decent pony when you're not trying to keep other ponies away."

Dusty turned away again, but this time he remained still, thinking. It was many seconds before he finally sighed and spoke. "Look, you two seem like good ponies, but neither of you has a clue what you're doing. Yeah, sure, you know about scavenging, but you're both naive

and inexperienced when it comes to anything else. You keep going like you are, thinking you know everything, you're going to end up just like the ponies outside."

My smile died away at the thought; I really didn't want to imagine myself in the place of one of those corpses. "I... think we might know more than you give us credit for," I said, and quickly held up a hoof as he opened his mouth again. "No, I know we don't know as much about combat as you do. That seems pretty obvious. But we aren't completely clueless, and more importantly, we're trying to learn more."

He sighed, and relented just a little. "Well... just try not to get killed while you do. Learning by experience tends to mean learning from mistakes, and out here, mistakes get you killed."

A yell from the office pulled our attention that way, and Starlight emerged onto the catwalk with a thick folder floating beside her. "Hey, guys! I found the inventory!"

Dusty quirked an eyebrow. "Uh... congratulations?"

She smirked down at us. "Hell yes, congratulations," she said as she hopped down atop the shelf beneath the catwalk. "There are, like, five bajillion crates in here." She leaped across the gap to the next row of shelves. "You want to open crate after crate of steel floor-grates, rebar, and concrete?"

She slid sideways, dropping over the edge of the shelf. She dangled there for a moment before twisting and dropping to the floor with a clatter of hooves. "Or do you want to go right up to, say, a crate loaded with two-dozen blast-door servos and all their electrically-powered, hydraulically-operated goodness?" She thumped a hoof triumphantly against the crate she had landed next to, grinning smugly.

"Okay," Dusty said, slowly nodding. "That's actually pretty useful."

"Oh, what's that?" Starlight said, her smirk returning as she cast a smug glare his way. "I actually know what I'm talking about?"

His expression fell to a flat glare, and he turned it my way. "Yeah, that went well."

I responded with a sigh, burying my face in a hoof.

Starlight looked back and forth between the two of us. "...Did I miss something?"

Dusty responded by turning his flat glare her way. “Whisper here was just talking to me about being nice, so we wouldn’t be at each other’s throats the whole time.”

“Oh?” She replied, seemingly confused for a moment. “Oh.” She looked over at the folder floating next to her, then the crate she was still leaning against. She lowered her hoof again. “Um, sorry?”

He continued to stare for an awkward moment before finally rolling his eyes. “Good enough. Come on, there’s a door to a back area. We’ll check through there real quick, then we can look for any valuables in that inventory.”

“Sounds... good?” Starlight said, casting a confused and questioning glance my way.

We followed along behind Dusty. Sure enough, there was a doorway leading into another area. The door itself had been torn free of its hinges, with a massive dent right in the middle, and lay half atop another dead pony. Three more corpses were scattered around the room.

I’ll spare you the details. I think you’ve gotten the idea by now. Suffice to say, each was gruesome in its own uniquely horrific way, and the stench was absolutely appalling.

The room they lay in was in shambles. It seems to have been used as a common room, but the table was now broken under one of the decaying ponies, with chairs and even a couch overturned. Signs of violence abounded, and not just from the bodies. There were casings scattered about, and bullet holes peppered an entire wall and the one chair that remained standing. A stubby rifle, as crude as my own, lay near one of the dead ponies, its barrel dented in and bent. A couple crude knives and a length of pipe with a spiked end lay near the other ponies. The weapons had evidently done them no good against their attacker.

Playing cards were scattered around the broken table, and empty bottles lay all over the room. Even with my attempt to focus on empirical data, that little detail led my mind on unpleasant paths. It was hard to imagine these ponies as murderous raiders. It was much easier to imagine a group of happy, colorful ponies, laughing and drinking and playing games.

Starlight gagged again, pulling out her jacket to wrap around her muzzle as best she could without blocking her sight. I tore my gaze from the scene of destruction, and looked to Dusty. "So, about Sickie," I quietly said. "We didn't see anypony else with her."

"Yeah, you wouldn't," Dusty said, holding a fetlock to his nose. "She doesn't play well with others."

"So she came here, killed... at least a dozen raiders, and did this all on her own?" I looked around the room, with its shattered furniture and scattered bodies. It looked like it had been a hell of a fight. "How?"

"Well, to start with, shooting her tends to just piss her off," Dusty said. "She's huge, probably the strongest and toughest pony I've ever met, and that's not even counting her armor. I only saw her in a fight once, but I saw a raider with a pipe rifle put at least five rounds into her chest plate. I don't think she even noticed."

"That's damn good armor," Starlight said, her voice muffled as she pulled on the sleeves of her jacket, tying her makeshift face-mask in place.

"It probably weighs more than you do," Dusty said. "Hell, probably more than *I* do. And if that all wasn't enough, she's usually loaded up on just about every combat drug you can think of."

"Probably doesn't help that these ponies emptied enough bottles to leave an entire town blackout-drunk," Starlight said through her makeshift face-mask. "Can we move on, now?"

"Yeah," Dusty said. "Come on."

We moved past the bodies, stepping over the overturned chair blocking the walkway. The smell improved only marginally as we stepped through the doorway and into another room. It was a barracks, with a dozen bunks and plenty of lockers. It also contained at least a hundred more bottles, as well as their source: a couple of crates were set near the center of the room, the packaging material that had secured the bottles within strewn about them.

Starlight stepped up to the box, squinting to read the worn label, then flipping open the folder levitating alongside her. "Two times one gross, Serene Skies Quality Cider." She looked back at the scattered bottles. "Two hundred and eighty eight bottles, and they're all empty."

Shit, these guys must have been wasted.”

“Serene Skies is non-alcoholic,” I said. A moment later, I had to correct myself. “Well, it was. I have no idea what two hundred years does to cider.”

While I couldn’t see her mouth under the jacket, I could see the corners of Starlight’s eye rise with her grin. “You know the coolest shit, Whisper!”

Even Dusty chuckled, though it came out more as a choked snicker as he made his way past us. Only three doors remained. One led back outside, hanging halfway open but undamaged. Another led into what looked to have once been an office, complete with desk and shattered terminal. Opposite the office was the most unusual room of the entire place. Unlike the rest of the building, with its exposed supports and sheet-metal walls, it was made of solid, poured concrete. The door was normal size, but made of heavy metal, even having another metal plate welded on to cover the latch, likely to prevent easily shimmying it. It was battered, scraped, and dented by these ponies’ assault, but it had held firm.

Dusty was grinning as he looked over the door and the wall it was set in. “Now this looks more promising.”

“Yeah,” Starlight said, the corners of her eyes wrinkling with a grin. “Nopony makes a room like that unless they want to keep something important in it.”

I nodded along. “So, how do we get in?”

“Can either of you salvage experts pick a lock?”

Starlight gave a short, humorless laugh. “It looks like they took a chisel to the lock,” Starlight said, opening her bags and rooting around. “I doubt anypony could pick it, now.” A moment later, she pulled out a pair of dark goggles, minus the strap, and what I soon discovered was a hoof-held cutting torch. “But don’t you worry. I got this.”

We stepped back as she moved in, not toward the lock itself, but the heavy hinges on the opposite side. She started to cut, and we looked away, watching the sharp shadows dancing around the room as she worked.

Less than a minute later, the torch winked out, and she gave a satis-

fied laugh. We turned back as she pulled out a small pry bar, wedging it into the gap of the door, and pushed. It took several tries and a bit of grunting before a grinding sound emanated from the door, and with one final push of the bar, the severed hinges slid free and the back corner of the door thumped down to the floor.

“Stand back,” Starlight called out as she took a step away, and we held back as the door teetered and fell outward. The top crashed into the opposite wall, tearing into the sheet metal and denting the support behind it before coming to a halt barely a foot from the ground.

Eager to see what we had uncovered, we entered the room.

The first thing I noticed were the many different shelves, the lockers, and the two dead ponies lying in the center of the room. It was a strange relief that these bodies were unlike the ones outside. They had been there much longer, possibly since the war itself. Nothing remained of them but skeletons and the strips of cloth that had once been uniforms.

That relief was slightly spoiled on seeing the jagged, gaping holes missing from the back of each pony’s skull, and the old-model service rifle laid across the abdomen of one of them. The implication was clear to me, but where the scenes outside had evoked horror, this one produced a sympathetic sadness.

We didn’t linger long on that before turning to the contents of the room.

As it turns out, the locked and heavily reinforced room was an armory.

Granted, it was an armory for a small army depot well away from the frontlines, and it was equipped as such. We didn’t find a grand arsenal of military weapons, but we found enough that it began to look like the trip might be worthwhile after all. Dusty and Starlight worked together for once as they stripped the small armory, sorting the contents into two sets. One consisted of the items that were in good condition, while the second, larger group included all those that were not.

By the time we had finished, there were three old service rifles, complete with slings and cleaning kits, ten pistols with holsters, and three grenades. Aside from the weapons, there were also a half dozen ratty uniforms, which we tossed aside, and helmets, which were added

to the pile. Of the firearms, only three of the pistols were judged to be in acceptable condition. None of the rifles made the cut, though Dusty noted one of the rifles as being “pretty close”. There was also an impressive amount of ammo, totaling about three hundred rounds for both the rifles and pistols. Dusty had put most of those in the “questionable” pile, and was in the process of doing the same with the magazines.

“Well, it’s not great, but it should get us some good caps,” Dusty said. “There’s always a market for guns and ammo.”

I saw a different opportunity for advancement, however. “Would you mind if I keep one of those pistols?” I asked. “It’s the model I trained on, and I’d like to have an alternative to this rifle.” And as much as I disliked this whole deal of needing to be armed, I’d much rather one that was small and easy to conceal. Consider it an old habit, if you must.

“Fine with me,” Dusty said with a shrug, looking over one of the rifle magazines. “You can do whatever you want with your share of the loot.”

I picked one of the “good” pistols, checking it over. My firearm training had been a long time ago—even perceptually speaking—but I still remembered my lessons well enough for that. To tell the truth, I may have made a little bit of a show of checking over the weapon. Showing competency with firearms seemed like a good way of earning some degree of respect from Dusty, which could only smooth things over for the rest of our outing.

With my check of the weapon done, I slid in one of the “good” magazines, loaded with “good” ammunition. Then I hesitated. My instructor had focused primarily on firearm safety, with marksmanship as a largely secondary concern. One of the lessons of that training was to only chamber a round when a shooting engagement was likely.

Reluctantly, I pulled back the slide. The Wasteland is a dangerous place.

I engaged the safety and slid the pistol into its holster. Then it was just a matter of finding the best place to strap it. The outside of the right foreleg, like Starlight wore hers, seemed the most sensible position.

I strapped it on, testing out the fit and position. It put the pistol's bit within easy reach, while keeping it out of the way of the rifle's stock. It was acceptable.

The holster also had a pouch for a pair of spare magazines, so I picked out two more and loaded them up. I tried not to think too much on the size of arsenal I was quickly amassing.

"Looks good on you," Starlight said, sharing a smile. I had more mixed thoughts on the subject, as I wasn't sure I liked the fashion statement it made. Despite that, it was clear she meant it as a compliment, so I smiled back. She seemed happy with the reaction. "So, we should get back to the warehouse. There are a few crates of stuff that might get us good caps."

"You two go ahead," Dusty said, picking up one of the rifles. "I'm going to see if I can get one of these fixed up."

"Sure thing," Starlight said, while I enjoyed the improvement in her mood. "Oh, and when you're done here, maybe look around, see if there's a wagon or cart or *anything* we can use to haul stuff. The more we can carry, the more caps we make."

"Sounds good," Dusty said, and we parted ways. We remained silent, holding our breath as we passed the bodies, until we emerged into the warehouse proper once again.

"Okay," Starlight said, leading the way. "Let's get that crate of servos open and emptied out, then we can look for other good stuff."

"Rust was wanting machine parts," I said, trying to remember the exact list Scrap had rattled off. "I remember rubber was important. Lubricant and bearings. Oh, and tools."

"Oh, tools! We'll have to swing back by that motorwagon, they had a bunch out there. Those should sell well."

She broke out the pry bar once again to pry the lid off the crate she had indicated before, the nails squealing loudly as they resisted. "Soooo," she said as she shifted to pry further down the lid. "What did you say to Dusty that got him to pull his head out of his ass?"

I shrugged. "I think he's got trust issues. You heard what happened with the last pony he worked with. He seems pretty nice when he isn't trying to drive us away. I basically just pointed that out and convinced

him he didn't need to do that with us."

"Huh." She gave another sharp pull of the pry bar, and the lid finally came free. "Surprised that worked."

"He'll probably be a bit critical of our fighting ability," I said as I took one end of the lid and helped her haul it off. "But let's face it, neither of us are really hardened soldiers."

"Yeah, well, he doesn't have to be a dick about it."

We dropped the lid to the ground, returning to the crate to begin unloading it. "No, and I told him so," I said. "I expect he'll still have some criticisms to make, but hopefully he might be convinced to be more helpful about it."

She snorted, pulling apart the packaging to retrieve the contents. "I don't need his help. I was hunting with my mom since I could float a rifle, and I'm an excellent shot."

"Oh, I know," I said, nodding along as I helped. "It's just that I imagine he's got a lot more experience with the tactical side of a firefight. Sounds like he's been doing that sort of thing for a while. He might have some useful things we could learn."

She grunted. "Yeah, I'd rather just get this all done with and ditch the dumb prick."

I resisted the urge to sigh. Things would go much smoother if ponies would just get along. Instead, I was stuck in a much trickier situation: trying to convince two ponies of very different mindsets to react the way I wanted them to react. I cast a quick glance toward the back door, making sure Dusty wasn't listening in, and spoke slightly quieter. "Just play gentle with him. I may have convinced him to be a bit nicer, but he seems pretty quick to upset."

"Right," she said, smirking. "Coddle the big baby, got it."

I chuckled softly, even though I found the situation anything but funny. "Something like that. It's more that we can avoid a lot of headaches by playing along."

She paused, leaning on the edge of the crate. "Eh. Yeah, I guess you're right." She smiled, slowly. "Sneaky little Whisper. I like it."

We chuckled quietly, continuing to unload the crate. When we finished there, we moved on to other crates, following the inventory

Starlight had discovered. Before long the servos had been joined by a case of industrial lubricant, 8 large rolling bearings, and a whole crate of pneumatic hoses. The final crate we opened held four high-energy power distribution arrays. They were bulky devices, intended to split the powerful output of large-scale spark generators, and full of all sorts of electronics that might fetch good prices from Emerald.

We were just unloading it when Dusty walked up to the loading dock. "Found a cart," he said around his cigarette, and shrugged off the collar. The cart it was attached to was small, with spiked poles rising from each corner, and the rickety wood frame was splashed in purple paint that had long ago faded. "We'll need to strip it, though. I'm pretty sure it belonged to these ponies, and we don't want the problems it'll bring if somepony recognizes it."

It was quick work to pull the poles off and scrape away the chipped paint, and soon we were loading our loot into the wagon. That loot joined the weapons Dusty had already loaded into it, which included his old pipe rifle. He had one of the service rifles strapped across his back, instead. Even though I really wanted to get out of there and have a chance to just think and sort things out, it seemed like a good opening. Put the mission before personal comfort, and all that. "Got that one working, then?" I asked rhetorically.

"Yep," he said, giving a little shrug of his shoulder to shift the rifle. "Picked out the best parts and oiled her up. Should do well. It's not quite what I'd prefer, but it beats the hell out of a cheap pipe rifle."

"Equestrian Army Service Rifle, Infantry, Model 3." I couldn't help but smirk a little at the way his eyebrow quirked upward at that. "The first self-loading service rifle. Not as common as the later Model 4, but I've heard good things about them."

"Yes. Well." Dusty shrugged again. "It's also a lot heavier, and kicks like a mule. I guess the effective range is a bit longer, but it's not as flexible. Not as good for suppressing fire, for example." He frowned, then shook his head. "Guess it might fit my situation a bit better now, though. I'm too used to fighting in a team."

"Well, you've got a team for now," I said, giving as genuine-looking of a smile as I could manage. "At least until we're done with the job."

And heck, my rifle's pretty much *only* good for suppressive fire."

I felt a little proud of myself as he chuckled. Combine a little bit of Ironshod Firearms internal design documents, a passing interest in military developments, a couple classes of very basic firearm safety, and a good deal of faking it, and even I could look like I knew what I was talking about.

We finished loading the cart, including a quick trip out to grab the tools near the motorwagon, while Starlight gave the inventory one final read-through. "Yeah, I'm not really seeing much else here, unless somepony wants to buy about five hundred tons of concrete. I don't think anything else would be worth the weight to haul back." She closed the folder. "Kind of annoying that they had two crates of cider but not a single piece of food. Who planned that?"

"Let's get going," Dusty said, sliding his rifle to the side as he slipped the cart's collar on once again. "If we make a good push, we can probably get back to Gemstone before it's too dark to travel."

With our carefully selected load of salvage, the cart gave only the barest squeal of protest as it started to roll. I almost started feeling good that something had gone right. Of course, we had to roll past several decaying and mutilated ponies on our way out. It's fair to say that put a damper on things. One could pretend the corpses weren't there when they were out of sight—and smell—but it's much harder when you're walking past the bodies as crows picked away at them.

Passing through the gate, I slowed, looking at torso-pony once again. I couldn't help it. It was just so grotesque, so violent, so *sadistic*.

The few scraggly remnants of purple fur rustled in the dry breeze, the one last hint of what that pony had once been. Soon even that would be gone.

"I feel like we should do something about them," I said, my voice somber. "It doesn't feel right just leaving them like this."

"They were raiders," Dusty called back, his pace never wavering. "Fuck 'em."

I winced at the coldness.

Starlight stepped up beside me. "Come on, Whisper," she said, her voice soft and quiet. Comforting. She tried to give a sympathetic

smile, though given our surroundings, it ended up as more of a grimace. “Crows have to eat, too.”

I sighed, turning away from the desecrated body. “Yeah,” I murmured, and followed along, while my imagination pictured black forms feasting on ponies.

We all have to eat.

Chapter Seven

A Job Well Done

We put our commandeered wagon out of our misery on the slope below Gemstone.

The rickety thing had started breaking down barely an hour out of the depot, when one of the wheels started to wobble. We had to make a couple of stops to shore it up, but it kept getting worse and worse. I'm surprised it made it as far as it did.

It seems the jolt of crossing the old train tracks below Gemstone was a bit too much to expect of the decrepit vehicle. The joint that held the wheel to the axle gave one final wobble, and then splintered and broke free, followed by the crash of the wagon collapsing to the ground.

We gathered up our spilled loot, loosely tying things together with pneumatic hoses so we could balance them across our backs. Sure, we probably could have patched up the wagon for the last quarter-mile of travel, but we were ready to be done with the thing. Starlight even pulled out her Recharger and put a shot into the wreck, for good measure.

We trudged up the slope toward the lights shining in the rapidly growing darkness, grumbling and grunting the whole way.

"I swear," Starlight said as she took slow, laborious steps. "I need to find some sort of spell that can bring ponies back from the dead." She grunted as she shifted her load. "And then we can go back there and revive those raiders *so I can kill them again.*"

I disliked this more bloodthirsty side of Starlight, even if I was fairly certain she wasn't serious. I also found it slightly concerning that the first objection to come to mind was related to the difficulty of casting such a spell, if it even existed, rather than objecting over its intended use.

While I had the lightest load, I was still struggling to keep up with my companions. It seemed a perpetual state of fatigue was to be my fate, or so I had grumpily thought to myself at the time. I was physically and mentally exhausted. Everything else was falling into the background.

I wanted nothing more than to collapse somewhere safe and sleep. My mission could wait until I was in any shape to do anything about it.

The one comfort I had during that agonizing little hike was Starlight expressing similar sentiments. “Ugh. I am so done with all of this,” she grumbled, shifting her load once again, though I doubt it helped any more than all the other times she tried it. Up ahead, Dazzle gave us a wave from atop the wall, before turning back to call for the gate to be opened. “Screw the salvage,” Starlight said. “That can wait for morning. Hell, even my Lancer can wait for morning. All I want to do is find a nice, comfy bed. A place like this has to have *something*.”

Still struggling to stay upright, I somehow managed to balance that task with talking. “Emerald runs the inn, if I remember correctly.”

“To Emerald, then!” Starlight called out, though the enthusiasm was a bit dampened by a stumble in mid-declaration. “I knew I liked her for a good reason.”

Dusty gave a faint, muffled snort of amusement. Or maybe derision. I’m not entirely certain.

Perhaps it was the exhaustion, or perhaps it was just the depressing day that seemed to drag on and on, but Dusty’s hint of amusement—I assumed it was amusement—seemed to plant the idea in my head to brighten the mood. I immediately thought of the blush she had shown during our previous encounter with Emerald. So, in an effort to lighten the mood, and maybe even shore up her self-esteem, I said, “I think she might like you, too.”

If I’d been less exhausted, I might have been a bit more cautious about trying a delicate social maneuver like that. There was a fairly narrow window between excessive taunting that could damage the relationship I had built up with her, and encouraging somepony into another relationship that could detract from it. Looking back, I’m not sure if it would have mattered. My misjudgement had taken place the day before, when I had been in a considerably better state of mind.

“Oh?” she asked, making it another two steps before some further implications of the simple statement processed. She almost stumbled again, her nose scrunching up. “Eww, Whisper! Gross.”

Needless to say, that was not the response I was expecting. “Eww?”

I asked from under my small mountain of salvage.

"Yeah, eww," she said, sticking out her tongue as if she'd tasted something rotten. "She's, like, thirty years older than me!"

Dusty gave another snort; while my attempt to brighten Starlight's mood seemed to be falling short, it seemed to have done an excellent job with him. "What are you, two?" he asked.

The look Starlight gave him was one of ultimate shock and betrayal, which seemed a bit ironic with how often the two had been butting heads during our short journey. "Dusty, what the hell?"

He was smiling, even if he tried unsuccessfully to hide it. "It's just that she can't be that much over thirty, and if she's thirty years older than you..."

Starlight groaned. "Oh, fine. So it's like... ten or fifteen years, whatever. Point is, she's a lot older than me." She snorted, looking away. "Besides, I'm not into mares."

"Uh-huh," Dusty said, in a tone that made it clear he wasn't buying it. "So Whisper having to get her own bedding wasn't some lover's spat, then?"

That brought Starlight's blush back full-force. "What? No, it's not like that!"

I almost winced at her reply. It wasn't for being "shunned". It was because of how poorly she worded her reply. Some ponies can't even tell the truth convincingly.

I had to come to her defense. "I didn't have any supplies," I said. "After the raiders hit our caravan, we were stuck with only enough bedding for one pony, but we're good friends, so we shared."

"Uh-huh," Dusty said again as he led us through the gates.

"I'm not into mares!" Starlight said again. "It wasn't like that."

"If you say so," Dusty said. "Sure heard a lot of rustling around that first night."

"It was a small bed!" Starlight said, her voice rising. "There wasn't enough room for both of us to get comfortable!"

Dusty barely held back a chuckle. "Uh-huh."

"I like stallions!"

Starlight froze at the snicker that came from above us.

"Aw, you're breaking my heart, little Star!"

Starlight slowly looked up to meet the cheshire grin of Dazzle, lounging against her plasma cannon. "But don't you worry," Dazzle said, giving a wink. "I'm pretty sure every stallion in town heard you there."

Starlight stood there, stuck between crushing embarrassment and horror. She finally turned away, as if to use the large pile of salvage as a shield, and hustled as best as she could under that weight toward Emerald's shop. I hung back just long enough to shoot Dazzle a dirty glare before following.

Emerald was kicked back behind the counter when we entered, reading on her PipBuck. She lit up the moment she saw us—and possibly the amount of material we had brought to trade—and quickly stood, making her way around the counter. "Well, well! It's good to see you three again, and so soon! I take it the trip went well?"

Starlight halted, a blush still coloring her cheeks. "Uh, y-yeah. I guess so? Kind of."

"Well now, it sounds like there's an interesting story behind that answer."

Starlight hesitated, and I stepped forward again, despite my exhaustion. "Maybe we could tell the story in the morning? We're just about dead on our hooves and need a place to sleep. We can tell you all about it while we trade some of this salvage."

She nodded, smiling graciously. "Of course. You three have probably had a long day; I won't keep you up any longer. We've got regular rooms for eight caps, or one of the bigger upstairs suites for twenty."

"Just a regular room," Starlight said.

"Sure thing," Emerald said with a nod. "Though, um, it might be a little *cozy* fitting three ponies in one bed."

The playful smile she gave brought Starlight's blush back in full force. Starlight quickly gestured toward Dusty. "He can pay for his own room."

Dusty just snickered.

After looking around at the three of us, Emerald asked, "So am I going to get this story in the morning, too?"

“There’s no story,” Starlight quickly said. “He’s just being a pervert.” She tried to change the subject by digging out some caps, but Emerald just held up a hoof.

“You can pay me in the morning.” She pointed the same hoof to the doorway in the back of the shop. “All the ground-floor rooms are vacant. Just grab whichever one you want, and get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

We thanked her—although Starlight’s came out half-mumbled—and made our way further in. Starlight and I claimed the first room, and faced only a little bit of difficulty getting the couple hundred pounds of salvage through the doorway. Dusty left his load with us, to sell in the morning, and headed off to his own room.

While small, it was very nice and well-kept. A shuttered window would let in light during the day, and a rotary switch by the door controlled a simple ceiling light. Though there was only the single bed, it was a large one, and in very good condition for being two centuries old. It was topped with several pillows and a thick comforter, and looked like the most wonderful thing in the world.

With Dusty out of sight, Starlight was a lot less awkward about sharing a bed again. That, or she was simply too tired to care, a sentiment I could certainly agree with. She quickly shed her saddlebags, dumping them unceremoniously on the floor, and slipped in under the covers. I made sure to give her plenty of room when I joined her.

I went out so quickly that I hardly remembered crawling into bed.



I slept in fits and starts.

I had no problem getting to sleep. The fatigue took care of that. I had hardly drifted off when I was awake again, my heart pounding and my throat tight. I would calm down again, and fatigue would take hold once more, and the cycle would repeat. The night passed in a slow blur, an indistinct jumble of dreams and wakefulness.

When light started to seep around the edges of the window shutters, I gave up on sleep. Physically, I was rested, yet I felt every bit as exhausted as I had the night before.

Starlight was already up, sitting on the floor and fiddling with one of the door servos we had salvaged from the depot. She stopped as I pushed the blanket aside and heaved myself up into a sitting position. "Hey, Whisper." Her words were soft, almost delicate, and when I looked back to her, I could see the worry in her eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, though it sounded doubtful even to my own ears. "That is, as okay as I can be, all things considered."

The worried expression didn't go away as she set the servo aside. She seemed hesitant, but forced herself to speak. "I... heard you crying last night. I was just... worried for you."

"Oh." My expression, already slack and bleary, fell further. My ears hung low, my eyes drifting down to the floor. "Sorry. It's been a rough couple of days."

Starlight nodded, though the motion came slowly. "Was it about what Dusty was saying?"

In my state, it took me a few moments to realize what she was talking about. She wasn't asking about what Dusty had said, himself. The conclusions she had drawn from the previous evening were so far off the mark that it took little effort to crack a weak smile. "I wouldn't listen to Dusty. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Yeah," Starlight agreed, without conviction.

The smile I had conjured died away. She was drawing all the wrong conclusions, and that could only lead to problems. As much as I would have preferred to avoid lingering on those details, I knew it was a mistake I would have to correct. I sighed, and spoke again. "I was dreaming about my mother."

That caught her attention, her ears perking up. I continued on. "And then I started mixing in stuff from the depot, yesterday, and..." I trailed off, shuddering. It wasn't even an act. I actually, physically shuddered. Just a week ago, seeing my Queen's empty husk had been the absolute height of horror. I knew now that it could have been worse. As terrible as it had been to see her body lying there, hollow and devoid of life, there was at least some sense of peace and stillness. After the carnage of the army depot, my imagination had gone to great lengths to show me just how much worse it could have been.

I'd been so caught up in my own emotions that I hadn't noticed Starlight moving until she wrapped me in a hug. I hugged back, almost mechanically, and we held each other as I focused on breathing slowly and smoothly.

At the same time, I could feel that the sense of affection Starlight held for me had grown stronger. I drew on a tiny bit of that feeling. It was just a nibble, too little to actually make a difference for either of us, but I still found it encouraging. I think I needed that at the time. The faint tremble that had persisted finally faded away.

She eventually released the hug, sitting beside me on the bed. We sat in silence for some time before she spoke. "What was she like?" she asked. "Your mother."

My first reaction was to evade, to avoid the subject and steer the conversation toward something else, but I realized that wouldn't work. So I took another deep breath, and focused on the task at hoof. "She was... wonderful. She was wise and brilliant, and always seemed to know the right thing to say to make you feel better. She was kind. And... and she always made me feel like she was proud of me."

I realized then that I was smiling. My throat was tight, and my eyes watered, but I was smiling, even if it was still faint. I blinked back the growing tears and looked to Starlight. She was smiling, too, and when our eyes met, she gave me a little nod.

Then she chuckled and looked away. "My mom was the coolest mom ever. Like, total badass, but laid back about it. She taught me everything I know about scavenging, shooting, stuff like that. Guess she was like a role model or something. I want to be just like her."

I nodded, my smile growing a bit more. "I know the feeling."

Starlight looked back to me. We sat in comfortable silence for a couple of seconds before she asked, "What was her name?"

I hesitated. There had been only a few dozen ponies who knew of my Queen's name, and it struck me as exceptionally unlikely that the information would have survived the intervening apocalypse and two hundred years' wait, and even more unlikely that they would think to connect the two. That miniscule risk was outweighed by the benefits of being able to use the truth, rather than having to create and remember

a lie. Besides, if giving a name helped Starlight bond with me, it would be a secret well-spent. “Her name was Ephema.”

Starlight cocked her head to the side. I’d heard many different kinds of pony names—though I had no idea if naming conventions might have changed over two hundred years!—but that was evidently not the kind of name she had expected. “Huh. Neat name.” She shrugged. “Mine was Midnight.”

I nodded, and we fell into silence once again.

It didn’t last long before Starlight rose to her hooves. “We should get out there before Dusty gets more stupid ideas.” She gave a nervous chuckle. “We need to sell off all this stuff, too.”

I agreed, and we gathered up our salvage once again.



While Starlight talked with Emerald, I wandered the store.

I’ll admit, there was a little bit of discomfort at leaving an inherently adversarial social interaction in the hooves of someone else. I was used to depending on my own abilities in that field, and as much as I like her, Starlight didn’t strike me as having a very diverse range of social skills; she was friendly and energetic—at least when she wasn’t butting heads with Dusty—but those did not translate into being particularly good at bartering. Despite that, I felt like my hooves were tied. She had experience salvaging, and I assumed that must include experience in selling that salvage. I also lacked a firm understanding of how much value different items demanded, and of how that value translated to the new bottlecap standard.

I suspect my incredulity at the particular form of currency was not aiding my attempts to understand the Wasteland’s economy.

The shelves of goods bore only a vague resemblance to the shops I had been used to before the end. I suppose an antique shop or thrift store might be the closest comparison; old and used items that covered a broad spectrum of goods, often with signs of old repairs. There was no packaging, much less the rows of identical pristine items, fresh off the assembly lines, that filled the shelves of the major stores.

I spent a lot of time looking, though there was little that I had

any real interest in buying. Mostly, I was satisfying my curiosity while gathering potentially useful information: what sort of items might be available in the Wasteland.

The barding got a bit more interest, though. Even at the time, I recognized the thought process that had drawn my attention. With everything that had happened, I was feeling particularly vulnerable. Alone, having narrowly escaped death from multiple sources, and most recently, having received a vivid picture of what could happen to me if things went wrong. Barding might be little more than a safety blanket, but I had to consider that the possible peace-of-mind it could bring me might allow me to focus more on important matters.

Of course, that line of thought had a troubling number of conditional statements, not to mention my natural revulsion toward the idea of self-deception. Most importantly, the same logical process that led me to recognize the possible emotional benefit would likely strip me of most of that benefit. It's hard to trick yourself when you know you're trying to do so. I would still be vulnerable; the solution was not to delude myself into thinking I wasn't, but to act accordingly.

That said, barding could offer some degree of *physical* protection, which made it worth considering. Physical dangers were best defended against through avoidance, but it seemed likely I wouldn't be able to depend on such protection.

Which meant it all boiled down to a simple, logical weighing of costs versus benefits. That was something I could do.

Barding gave protection, but the better the protection, the more it would weigh. I did not yet have a source of food sufficient to sustain a high-strength form. I could wear very light barding, which would do little more than protect from scrapes, bruises, and the elements, or I could wear heavier barding that might protect from more significant threats, but in turn slowed me. That didn't strike me as a particularly good trade. Looking over the few outfits in Emerald's shop made the prospects look even more limited. With them all being of post-war construction, the only one that looked as if it would provide decent protection against firearms also looked to be far too heavy for me.

I was also wary of something so constrictive. It would limit my

abilities to transform, should the need arise. A form with a smaller frame would find the armor suddenly loose and encumbering; a form with a larger frame would be uncomfortable or impossible. On top of that, none of the armors were designed for pegasi, eliminating the possibility of taking a flying form. Sure, I was hoping to avoid the need to transform, as that would rather blow my cover and complicate my mission, but I disliked the idea of limiting my options unnecessarily.

And of course, there was the cost of, well, *cost*. We hadn't made enough yet to be making purchases that weren't necessary, and by the sounds of Starlight and Emerald's negotiations, we weren't making the small fortune we had set out imagining. Not that I fault Starlight's bartering for that; if anything, I got the impression Emerald was being quite generous with her prices. I'd caught hints of surprise in Starlight's voice at some of the prices offered.

Though I dismissed the armored barding, I did consider some of the clothing. I wouldn't mind something to protect me from the elements, even if Starlight had assured me that storms of such intensity were rare.

The other group of items I considered were weapons; and yes, the fact that only two categories I considered to be worth investigating were weapons and armor *did* trouble me, if somewhat less than it might have a few days earlier.

I skipped right over the small assortment of melee weapons; if things ever descended to the point where such a weapon was useful, it had gotten excessively desperate to the point that I might as well shed my disguise and try to use my magic to fight back. The other option would be to die, which would reveal my true nature anyway. If I had to be discovered, I'd much prefer the option that leaves me alive.

Admittedly, browsing Emerald's small selection of firearms was somewhat pointless. I already had a pistol I was familiar with. The rifle I had acquired from Sharps worked well enough, given my poor skill with it. An upgrade seemed decadent when the differences would largely be wasted on me. Still, I looked. If nothing else, it would give a good idea of what sort of threats I might face.

For better or worse, the selection was slim. I barely even looked at the post-war weapons, which consisted of a pair of mismatched rifles

and a clunky looking revolver, and instead turned to the old-world relics on display.

There wasn't much selection. There was a huge drum-fed Equestrian Army combat shotgun that hurt my teeth just to look at, a small-caliber civilian bolt-action rifle of some sort, one of those submachine guns that Ironshod had been trying to convince the Army to buy in bulk for vehicle crews and support personnel, and no less than three pistols identical to my own.

The item that caught my attention the most wasn't one of the weapons. Instead, it was an attachment on one of those weapons: a suppressor.

The cost/benefit analysis immediately labeled it of little benefit. If I needed to shoot my weapon, volume was likely to be unimportant. Still, I couldn't help but consider the idea of it opening my possibilities. Perhaps I still entertained a little bit of those assassin and commando fantasies. It seemed unlikely that I would need to quietly remove a pony, but it was possible that could be useful at some point in the future. And, judging from what I had seen of raiders, there were certainly some ponies whose death could only be an improvement for the world.

So I decided to inquire about its cost. If it was too expensive, perhaps I should make my own. I had been taught how they worked, and they were simple devices. It would probably be cheaper. Still, a professionally made suppressor made to carefully researched designs was sure to be superior to anything I could craft.

I returned to the front counter of the store to find the bartering complete, with Starlight idly rolling a small bag of caps in her hooves as the two mares talked.

"I've been to a lot of places before settling down here," Emerald was saying, "but I've never been there. Everything I heard of Dodge City sounded like trouble. I can't imagine living there."

"Oh, I didn't live there!" Starlight said with a laugh. "But we did go in there a couple times a month. Heck, I pretty much grew up there. It's not that dangerous if you know what to look out for." She tapped the PipBuck hanging around her neck. "Having one of these to avoid the irradiated parts helps, too."

"They're very helpful things," Emerald agreed. "So if not there, where did you live?"

"Oh, a little place called Dodge Junction. Wasn't much to talk about."

"Ah, I went through there, once," Emerald said, smiling. "Seemed like a nice place. Well, except for the creepy dead orchard."

"Yeah, you got that right," Starlight said with a laugh. "Anyway, how about you? You mentioned all the places you've been before coming here. Where'd you start out?"

Emerald's smile slipped, and she hesitated before replying. "Ehh... a little place called Serenity." Her smile turned wry. "Just a free survival tip: if the first thing you think of when hearing about a place is, 'hey, that sounds nice,' be suspicious."

I saw Starlight's skeptical expression, but she didn't inquire. I, however, found myself curious at the apparent double-standard. "I don't mean any offense, but Gemstone does have a certain 'too good to be true' feel that might make certain ponies suspicious."

Emerald laughed. "No offense taken! I couldn't blame you for feeling a bit suspicious. Heck, I'd even go so far as to say it's good that you are. We might be genuine, but there are far too many twisted ponies out there that use kindness as a lure." She shook her head, her expression having fallen with that last statement, but it brightened up once again. "So I'm not even going to tell you that you don't need to be suspicious of us. I don't expect anypony to just take my word about it. Instead, we'll just carry on, doing our best to show the rest of the Wasteland a better way through our example."

Starlight cast a curious look my way before smiling at Emerald. "Well I think Gemstone seems like a lovely place, and I hope more ponies start thinking the same way. The world could use more good ponies."

"That it could, hon," Emerald agreed. "There are too few of them, these days."

Starlight slowly nodded. "Is that why you left Serenity?"

Again, the older mare's expression fell, and there was a moment of silence before she replied. "Kind of, but not exactly. They're not really bad, just far less friendly than you'd think with a name like that. They

didn't like outsiders. Too many raiders and slavers and such, so they keep others at a distance; by force, if necessary." She smirked. "Was kind of a problem for me. I *like* meeting new ponies. So I headed out here."

"Sounds like a Stable," Starlight said, earning a dry chuckle from Emerald.

"It was about as isolationist as one," she said. "Still, my family lives there. I'd like to see them again, some day. I don't think they're bad ponies. Just... wrong." She shook her head and shrugged. "But, hey, maybe if what we're practicing here starts to spread, they'll see that ponies aren't that bad."

Starlight nodded. "Well, I hope you have luck with that. It'd be nice."

"Thank you," Emerald said. "I hope you three have luck, too. You all seem like nice ponies, and it's like you said; the world could use more good ponies."

"Thanks," Starlight said, then frowned. "Wait, three? You mean Dusty, too?"

"I do," Emerald said with a nod. "He might act all gruff and cynical, but he strikes me as a good pony under all that."

"Yyyeah," Starlight said, cocking an eyebrow. "If you say so."

"I like to think of myself as being pretty good at reading ponies," Emerald said, shrugging. "He's been hurt by other ponies, but I don't think he's given up on them yet. But we'll see, I'm sure. If nothing else, he's helping you two."

"It's just for the one job," Starlight said.

"Ah. Well I hope you two stay safe once that's over with." She chuckled as she pointed a hoof at the bag of caps Starlight was still playing with. "Speaking of which, I've got plenty of protection for sale if you're looking to send some of those caps back this way."

Starlight chuckled. "Thanks, but I think I'm good for now. I might be back for some of that barding once we've got a bit more caps to spare." Having said that, she looked my way. "Unless you've spotted something you want? A quarter of these are yours, after all."

She shook the bag, which jingled and clanked in the most unmusical fashion possible.

"There was something I was considering," I said. "I saw that one of the pistols had a suppressor attached. I was curious if you'd be willing to sell it separately, and if so, for how much?"

"Ah, so Whisper likes it quiet, does she?" Emerald chuckled softly. "That's a fairly uncommon item, but one that seems to have rather little demand. I could sell it for twenty-five... no, twenty caps."

I contemplated that for a couple of seconds before concluding I had no idea if that was a good value. I turned to Starlight and asked, "Does that sound like a fair price?"

She was already digging out the caps. "Oh yeah," she said, counting out the little metal trinkets.

Emerald opened the back of the display cabinet holding the pistols, and retrieved the weapon in question. Holding the grip in her teeth, she spun the suppressor between her hooves until it slid free, and held it out to me. "'Ere eh oh," she grunted around the bit before setting the weapon back in its place. "Make sure it fits right."

I copied her actions in reverse, while she swept away the tiny offering of caps without even counting them. It was awkward, lining it up while holding the gun in my mouth with my vision limited, but I managed. "Looks good," I finally said, giving it a little tug to ensure it was firmly in-place.

"I'd give it a few test-fires, just to make sure everything's running smoothly." Then she smiled. "Just, not in my shop, please."

"Of course," I said, and went to holster it. Then I stopped, realizing I had a new problem. "Right. I might need a new holster, too."

"Oh yeah. What do you have there?" She leaned over the counter, looking at the holster strapped to my leg. "Oh, Army holster. One of the good ones, too. Pass it over here. I'll cut a hole and stitch the edges for you."

I happily unstrapped it and passed it to her.

Dusty's voice came from right behind me. "Seriously?"

Naturally, the first reaction I had was to look at him. That resulted in my newly purchased suppressor smacking into the hoof he quickly put in its way. "Watch your muzzle, kid!"

I recoiled, turning my head away and down as I looked at him out

of the corner of my eye, pointing my pistol *away* from him. I felt like a fool, especially for how easily I had slipped into such casual treatment of a very lethal weapon. Just in case my shame wasn't complete, my assumed body betrayed me, a blush spreading across my cheeks.

"And seriously, a suppressor for your pistol?" Dusty frowned as he stared down at me. "Should I even ask what you plan on doing with that? Or about where you plan on getting subsonic ammo for it?"

Hoping to redeem myself in some small degree, I quickly—but quietly—spoke up. "Reducing the powder load by thirty percent puts the standard Equestrian Army ten-millimeter round below the speed of sound, while retaining enough energy to reliably cycle the weapon. I can do that with just a pair of pliers, if I have to." My barely remembered improvised tools and methods training came to the rescue as Dusty's frown deepened at the unexpected reply. And to think, it had been entirely useless trivia up until that moment.

"Or," Emerald cut in, "you can get some professionally made ones from my stock. I've got more ten-mil than I know what to do with, and if I remember correctly, a couple of them were some lightweight civilian brand. Pretty sure those were subsonic."

She dug around behind the counter for a moment before returning, setting two faded boxes of ammunition on the counter. I took one box and looked it over. Most of the data listed on the box meant little to me, but I knew what "hollow-point" meant, and the listed muzzle velocity was subsonic. "Yeah, these could do. How much would you charge for these?"

"Nopony wants to buy low-power ammo," Emerald said with a shrug. "Say a one-to-one trade for any regular rounds, and one-and-a-half caps per round for the rest?"

I agreed, pulling out my magazines and emptying them as she went to work on my holster. In the end, I had thirty five rounds sitting on the counter. Thirty six, once I remembered to clear the chamber. Starlight counted out six more bottlecaps, and I went through the slow process of loading the new rounds into the magazines. It was a tedious task to perform with mouth and hooves, but I managed.

By the time I was done with that and had pocketed the remaining

four rounds, Emerald had finished altering my holster. I tried it on, satisfied with the fit, and slid my pistol into it. It fit well, even if it seemed strange to see the suppressor extending out of the bottom. Holstering was a little awkward with the added length, as I had to draw my head back further to clear the edge of the holster, but it was manageable. I wasn't likely to be in any quick-draw competitions any time soon. At least, I hoped not, because that sounded like a fight I would lose.

"Are you done toy shopping?" Dusty dryly asked, while Starlight rolled her eyes in reply.

"I think that will do," I replied, then offered Emerald a smile. "Thank you very much, for everything."

"Of course," she said, beaming. "I hope I'll see you guys around soon. And if I see any more subsonics come through, I'll make sure to snag a box for you."

We gathered up our remaining salvage, and Emerald waved as we left. I continued to smile even after we stepped outside. It was a small thing, but it was nice to have something go right.

The moment we had stepped outside, Starlight spoke up, her voice full of tired irritation. "So what's the problem now, Dusty?"

He shot her a glance before gesturing toward my side. "What, that? There are only two kinds of ponies who tend to get suppressors. Professionals who need them for a specific purpose, and amateurs who think they're cool." He gave me a pointed look. "You're not a professional."

"Perhaps not in the way you're thinking," I said, while refusing to let my smile slip. "But I do actually know what I'm doing."

"Do you, now?" Dusty said, but Starlight cut him off before he could say any more.

"Oh, what do you even care? You're only with us another day or so. Let's just get this over with." She huffed, turning away and heading down the street.

Dusty paused a moment before shrugging and following along. "Sure. Fine."

We walked silently through the town. Starlight's shoulders were tense and her ears were pinned back, but as we drew near Arclight's workshop, the tension quickly faded. Her ears suddenly perked up to

the sound of a hissing pop from beyond the building, her scowl quickly replaced with a grin. She broke into a trot, and we quickened our pace to keep up.

We made our way through an open gate and into a junk-filled shooting range, and Starlight let out a very filly-like squeal of glee. Arclight had the Lancer set on one of the benches, straight and whole. He looked up from his examination and smiled as he saw Starlight approaching. “Ah, good morning!”

Starlight giggled and pranced up to him, eyes lighting up. “Is it fixed?”

“Yep! It—”

He was cut off as Starlight threw her hooves around him and hugged, letting out another high-pitched sound of glee that only eventually broke out into words. “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Despite the surprise at the sudden show of affection, Arclight managed a good-natured chuckle. “I’m glad to help,” he said, patting a hoof against her back. “Emerald told me you were back in town, so I made sure to get it done as soon as I could. Helps that none of the internals were damaged, so it was all easy stuff. I was just double-checking the alignment and sights, but it should be all good to go.”

She finally released him to turn her attention to her weapon. “So, it’s all ready? Can I fire it?”

“Of course,” he said, chuckling a bit more. “It’s your gun, after all. Just needs a freshly charged crystal and you’re set. We kind of forgot about the charging rack, but it’s no worry; I was able to rig something up.”

“Oh yeah, sorry,” Starlight said, though her attention was now focused entirely upon her Lancer. She hefted the lengthy weapon in her magic, and the handle in the rear pulled back to open the chamber. She removed the dull-red crystal within, and swapped it with a glowing one she pulled from a small case on her saddlebags; I caught the sight of another four crystals within it, resting in strange wire cradles and glowing with magic.

“Also, the sights were way off even after I straightened the frame,” Arclight said. “I didn’t know how you had them before, if you had any

sort of convergence point or the like. I just sighted them in parallel to the beam, but you can always adjust that if you'd prefer."

"That's exactly how I like it," Starlight said with glee as she brought the weapon close. The hairs on her cheek barely brushed against the side of the frame, one eye closing as the sight settled before the other one. She took a deep breath, then slowly let it out. As her breath ran out, she seemed frozen for just an instant; then there was the familiar sound of the weapon firing. I was close enough that I could hear the discharge of magic within the weapon itself, though it was almost entirely hidden behind the sharp snap and trailing hiss of the beam burning its way through the air.

At the end of the crude range were an array of bottles, cans, boards, and other debris that served as targets. One of those bottles flashed brilliant red and shattered, throwing off glowing embers that slowly burnt away in mid-air. Only a few pieces of molten glass peppered the ground around where the bottle had sat.

I knew magical energy weapons could be powerful, and had even fired an energy pistol in my training, but I'd rarely seen them in practice. And yes, a glass bottle is hardly the most durable of targets to demonstrate a weapon's power upon, but it had *vaporized* most of the bottle's mass, as if burning it to a fine ash. Glass is not terribly known for its flammable properties.

Okay, so it probably turned it to gas rather than literally burning it. I don't have a clue what kinds of temperatures and energies that involves, but that's still pretty scary.

Starlight slowly lowered the weapon, grinning. She looked back to me, blinking a couple times, then stepped in and gave me a hug. I accepted it gracefully as she buried her head next to mine, eyes closed to hide how they had watered up. Dusty made a point of looking away.

I could feel the love flowing out from her. It was more than a simple liking or preference. It was true love, deep and powerful, even if it felt strangely unfocused to me. It wasn't about the gun itself. It was more sentimental. I could appreciate that.

And yes, I fed on that love. I would be a fool not to.

When she released me, the hint of tears were gone. "I'm, uh... I'm

going to try a couple more shots. Just to be sure, you know?”

“Take all the time you need,” Arclight said. “And let me know if you want anything tweaked, I should be able to take care of that pretty quick.”

She thanked him and turned back to the range, and I took the chance to ask a question. “Would you mind if I fired a few rounds from my own gun?”

“Go right ahead,” he replied. “I leave the range open for anyone who wants to use it.”

I stepped up beside Starlight and drew my pistol. I gripped the bit firmly in my teeth, the stubby sights floating right before my eye. The balance felt odd, though I wasn’t sure if that was from my own lack of experience or the weight of the suppressor.

I shifted my grip slightly to line the sights up, and placed the front post directly over a tin can some twenty yards away, resting atop a bullet-riddled table. I disengaged the safety, then slowly pulled the trigger.

The gun bucked, nearly catching me by surprise with the force of it. The sharp *clack* of my weapon echoed for just an instant around the range, but it was dominated by the solid *whack* as the bullet took another chunk out of the table. It had been just a bit low and to the right. Still, not bad for a weapon I hadn’t fired in two hundred years.

Beside me, Starlight’s ear twitched, and she looked away from her own shooting to give me a worried look. “I don’t think that suppressor is, uh, suppressing.”

“Seems about right to me,” I said around my pistol’s bit. “It’s a lot quieter than a regular gunshot, at least.”

She looked unconvinced, but shrugged and returned to her own weapon.

I lined up another shot, this time adjusting up and to the left by a tiny bit. That time, the tin can spun away from the table, followed immediately by Starlight’s sharp cry. “Ow!”

I quickly looked her way, and only just stopped myself from pointing my pistol directly at her. She had a hoof to the side of her head, and was looking to me with an utterly shocked expression. That lasted for just a moment before she broke out in a laugh. “You just shot me in

the head!"

That was not the response I had expected. "What?"

Through her giggling, she said, "You pulled the trigger, fired off a round..." Her horn lit up, floating up a spent casing. "...and a little piece of metal hit me in the side of the head."

"Oh!" Her giggling was surprisingly infectious, and I soon found myself chuckling as I raised a hoof under the casing. "Heh, um, sorry."

She just chuckled in reply as she dropped the casing into my waiting hoof. I immediately jerked back and dropped it, holding my hoof up as I stared down at the offending—and still very hot—piece of metal. "Right. That was stupid."

"Sorry," Starlight said, though it barely interrupted her chuckling.

"That was my fault," I said, shaking my head. "We might want to swap places, too."

"Yeah, I think I've been shot in the head enough for one day," Starlight teased, sounding far too cheerful for such a statement. We shuffled around each other as we changed places; a quick glance back at Dusty showed him with his head bowed, a hoof resting firmly across the bridge of his nose. I didn't hear his deep sigh, but I'm sure it was there.

Once we were re-situated, I took aim and fired a third and fourth round. My accuracy was mediocre, but the weapon itself functioned perfectly. I reengaged the safety and holstered the weapon before removing the magazine and fishing out the four spare rounds I had purchased. I reloaded the magazine, watching the rounds slide down through the small holes in the back of the magazine. Once I put the last round in, I frowned; the little holes said it was one round short of being full. It took me a couple of seconds before realization struck, and my ears dropped. "Right."

"What's that?" Starlight asked while lining up another shot.

"Nothing," I said, swapping out that magazine for one of the full ones, and inserting that into my pistol.

Once he had recovered from our stunning show of competency, Dusty decided to fire off a few rounds as well. Arclight dug out some earmuffs for Starlight and myself, while Dusty used his own earplugs.

"Okay," Starlight said, raising a hoof to her earmuffs after his first

shot; I could feel the sound in my chest, if only weakly. "Yeah, I like your pistol more. Wow."

He only fired a couple rounds at a chunk of wood on the far end of the crude range, then stopped to adjust his sights. He did that a couple more times before nodding in satisfaction, swapping out the rifle's magazine for a full one, and slinging the weapon across his back again.

Arclight collected his earmuffs. "Come on back if you need anything. Adjustments, upgrades, repairs, whatever. I also have plenty of other weapons, and I'm always available for a commission."

We thanked him, promising to come back if we ever needed anything else. After that, it was a short walk back to the gate. Dusty was eager to set out, as he reasoned we could make Rust before nightfall if we hurried.

Personally, I'm glad Starlight was so distracted by her weapon. She missed Dazzle's wink, and the snicker from the stallion standing beside the guard-mare. I stared flatly at Dazzle, who at least had the good sense to raise a hoof in mock-surrender, as if saying she didn't mean anything serious by it. She was still smiling.

We had left the town and made it halfway down the slope before Starlight could no longer contain herself. "Okay, no, I've got to shoot it again!" She quickly unslung the Lancer as she called out. "Hey, Dusty! You think I can't shoot? Point to something, anything, and I'll hit it."

Dusty frowned as he halted, and for a moment I thought he was going to tell her no. After a moment of wavering, he rolled his eyes and gestured downslope toward the tracks. "That fence-post, just to the right of the collapsed water tower."

"Oh, come on," Starlight said. "That's, like, a hundred yards at most. Give me something harder!"

"More like two hundred," Dusty grumbled, then pointed out past the tracks. "Okay, that withered little cactus-thing with the two tops."

Starlight rolled her eyes dramatically. "I said harder. Fine, I'll choose." She scanned the narrow valley for a moment, then lifted her hoof to point. "There! You see that old dead tree?"

We both looked for several seconds before Dusty finally said, "No."

"Come on, it's right there," she said, jerking her hoof as if pointing

harder would make it easier for us. She finally added, "Right there, on top of the hill. It's silhouetted and everything!"

We looked up from the valley to the top of the opposite hill. It still took us a moment before we spotted the twisted remains of some long-dead tree. It was probably only a little taller than a pony, which made it hard to see at such a range.

"That tree?" Dusty asked, his voice expressing the skepticism I felt.

"Yeah, *that* tree," Starlight shot back as she leveled her weapon and squinted into the sight. "How far do you think that is?"

"At least half a mile," Dusty said. "Maybe three quarters."

"Well, as long as Arc set these sights right..." She went silent as she took a deep breath and let it out, repeating the same procedure as before. Again, a sharp snap pierced the air.

More than half a mile away, a cloud of red embers burst forth, filling the air around the tree with motes of light that quickly burnt away. When it faded, it revealed the stubby tree slowly collapsing onto its side, with the faint light of flames dancing around the edges of a gaping hole.

Starlight lowered her weapon, grinning. "I told you I knew how to shoot."



Despite the bleak landscape and constantly overcast skies, the trip to Rust was quiet and peaceful. It was also fairly easy going; while I didn't like being recognized as the weakest of the group, Starlight and Dusty carried most of what remained of our salvage. While my hooves were still sore from walking all day long, at least my back wasn't aching.

Seeing Rust again was oddly bittersweet. It was still a decrepit little settlement fitting of its name, yet I couldn't help feeling an odd sense of happiness to see its giant steel gates once again. I suppose there was some comfort in the familiar.

The gates opened, and we were met once again by a couple of armed ponies. Steel Shot was at their head. "Hey there, Dusty. Welcome back. How was the job?"

"Tedious and boring," Dusty replied. "And not the good kind of boring, either. Didn't turn out as well as I hoped, but it'll pay the bills."

"Sorry to hear that," Steel Shot said as the gate squeaked and ground shut behind us. "Might have some good news for you, though. Some fancy-pants mare turned up just after you left, looking to hire somepony. She's been hanging around since then, waiting for you to get back. Smells like caps to me."

"How many caps?" Starlight asked.

The question earned a sharp glance from Dusty before he looked back to Steel Shot. "I'll go see what she wants. She staying at Mustard's?"

"Eeyup," Steel Shot replied, then looked over to Starlight and myself. "Guess if you're friends of Dusty, I can let you hang onto your guns."

"They're not my friends," Dusty said, but Steel Shot just shrugged and waved a hoof.

"Coworkers, whatever." He turned, heading back toward the over-look. "I'll trust you to keep them in line. Good night, Dusty!"

Dusty grimaced as the other stallion walked off.

We all made our way to the foundry. Mostly, we wanted the caps. Myself, I appreciated it as being the least depressing part of the little town.

Scrap and Singe were sharing a meal when we arrived. The mare, her mane slightly shorter than the last time I met her, grinned upon seeing me. "Hey, new-face!" she called out, setting down the big bowl she had been slurping from. She stood. "Never did get your name, you know."

"It's Whisper," I said, and shook her offered hoof. She greeted the other ponies with me, though she had to prompt Starlight for her name; she evidently knew of Dusty already.

"So is all that stuff for us?" she said with a playful grin and a gesture to my back.

"It is," I said, and we set down our loads.

Singe dove right in, pulling apart the bundles and looking through the parts. "Well, they got plenty of rubber for you," she said, tossing a couple of the hoses to Scrap. "Hydraulics. And lubricant. Lots of it, too."

"What kind of lubricant?" Scrap asked.

His question was met with a playful smirk. “The machine kind,” she said, then slid the case toward him. “Looks like good industrial stuff. We can put that to good use.”

She turned back to the remaining items, and her eyes widened. “Oh, wow, is that... it is!” She hefted one of the large roller bearings. “What even uses bearings this size? I could rotate a building on these!”

Starlight, as our resident salvage expert, stepped in. “They came from a Stable-Tec shipment. It might have been for some big blast door.”

“That gives me some ideas,” Singe said. While she idly pondered various plans, murmuring excitedly to herself, Scrap stepped in to sort through the offering we had brought. I once again left the negotiations to Starlight. The bartering was much more involved this time, but they soon came up with numbers that left both sides satisfied. Scrap retrieved the requisite number of caps from a heavy, home-made safe, and we happily parted ways.

After splitting the caps in half, and accounting for the purchases we had made along the way, Starlight and I were a few hundred caps richer than we had been just a few days earlier. It was a small thing, but to me, it was tangible progress.

“And here’s your half,” Starlight said as she passed the bulging bag of caps to Dusty. He hefted it, eying it warily, but finally shoved it into a saddlebag.

“You two stay out of trouble. I don’t want to have to deal with it.” He turned and walked off. “Goodbye.”

Starlight stared at him, mouth hanging open and hoof half-raised as she watched him go. Soon her expression hardened into a glare. “Asshole,” she grumbled, though her expression softened as she looked at me, and she threw a foreleg around my shoulders. “Fuck it, we got our caps, it’s time to celebrate! I’m going to get the biggest, most unhealthy meal I can find and gorge myself until I pass out!”

She grinned broadly at me as she released her grip, and I smiled back. With a fresh plan at hoof, we headed toward the center of the little town. It was a detour from my grander plans, but even I had to admit that I could use a little break.

Chapter Eight

The Next Big Score

What's the one thing I remember the most from that night?

Bacon.

It had been a bit surprising to see that bacon, and a few other kinds of meat, were even offered at the “Food” place. I hadn't seen a single non-pony there, and couldn't imagine they got griffon—or other!—visitors enough to regularly cater to a non-herbivorous diet. I was even more surprised when Starlight lit up upon seeing the bacon, and quickly ordered some.

Don't get me wrong, I was quite happy to order some for myself. It was good bacon, too; nice, thick strips, and the cook prepared it almost perfectly; cooked all the way through and firming up, but not scorched and brittle like inexperienced cooks tend to make it. I enjoyed the opportunity to break from the herbivore's diet that I had been largely restricted to during my time in Appleloosa. Ponies weren't entirely strict vegetarians, often making use of eggs or milk in their cooking, but actual meat tended to be a bit too extreme for their tastes. A few of the more bold and experimentive ponies might try it, perhaps emulating griffons or other such cultures, so I had used that excuse to snatch the rare nibble of meat.

That ended after the second such treat in as many months, at which point I found I was getting a small reputation for it. That put a halt to my divergence from the standard pony diet, and after another month I had eradicated most traces of that reputation; to an Infiltrator, few things are as dangerous as standing out as “unusual”, even if that reputation was entirely playful.

So on the one hoof, it was a great relief to be able to broaden my dietary horizons without suffering suspicion or condescension for it.

On the other hoof, it was yet another reminder of how much things had changed.

I had many questions, ranging from cultural to historical to biological, but I set them aside for the moment and simply enjoyed my

meal. I'm not normally one to set aside questions and concerns for the pursuit of personal pleasure, but I think I can make an occasional exception for really good bacon.

I did somewhat regret having to voice any concern at all, when I noted how much more expensive the meat was than the vegetables they grew there. Our funds were still quite limited. Starlight laughed softly and soothed my fears.

"Trust me. You know what the best trick is to keeping from blowing all your caps? My mom taught me; you give yourself one splurge, one little extra you're going to get with your next big payoff, so you're not always regretting saving everything else for more practical stuff." She popped a slice of meat into her mouth and grinned. "And this time, I want bacon."

So we had our little celebration, such as it was. We had a huge, tasty meal, finishing up with a whole box of snack cakes and a couple chilly bottles of Sparkle Cola. It cost us as much as several days' worth of meals, but I couldn't say it wasn't worth it.

With full bellies and high spirits, we stumbled our way to Mustard's to get a room and sleep off the excess of food.



In hindsight, stuffing ourselves with fatty and sugary foods right before lying down to sleep was probably not the brightest of ideas.

My stomach, having seen such little use in the preceding centuries, was not quite ready to handle the monumental task I had set upon it. Starlight fared no better than I, leading me to wonder whether the pony digestive system was properly capable of handling the amount of greasy meat we had stuffed in it. We both woke early in the night to the bubbling and churning in our guts. We tossed and turned, keeping each other up as much as ourselves, while our stomachs slowly sorted things out. There was the occasional groan, hooves pressed to our own bellies, and at least one quick run to the toilet when our digestive tracts decided they had done all they could and quickly expelled the remains.

Relieved of their burden, our guts quickly settled down, and we drifted off, sleeping until noon.

And you know what? We still agreed that it was totally worth it.

Well, not at first. I woke to a feeling of crushing fatigue and a pounding head. I struggled to sit up, more out of determination to not remain lying there all day than a personal desire to be upright. I immediately found a bottle of water floating in front of my face.

When I pushed it weakly away—my stomach still felt a little funny—Starlight insisted. “Drink it. You’ll feel better.”

While I could have argued with her, it didn’t feel like a worthwhile expenditure of energy. I took a small drink at first, but under Starlight’s continuing insistence, I downed the whole bottle. I felt bloated afterwards, and lay down once again. But you know what? Just ten or twenty minutes later, I was feeling much better. I didn’t feel as worn out, and that headache was quickly receding into the background.

Starlight smiled, looking quite proud of herself.

Feeling better, we headed out. The first order of business was to get some breakfast; despite the size of our celebratory meal, we were both hungry once again. And then? Then it would be time to work out what we would do next.

Those plans derailed as soon as we made our way downstairs to the inn’s common room, to find Dusty sitting there, hooves steepled and staring off into space. He was one of only three ponies in the room; while the other two were sharing a light meal and talking, he simply sat there, with an untouched glass of water set before him.

We might have just passed right by, but something about it caught Starlight’s interest. That, or her ire. She changed course to pass by him, and halted a short distance away. “What’s up with you?”

He didn’t even blink. “Thinking.”

“Yeah,” Starlight dryly replied. “We could smell the smoke. Thinking about what?”

That finally brought Dusty’s attention back to the room he was in. He glared flatly at her for a moment before looking back the way he had been. “About a job offer.”

Seeing as he didn’t seem very talkative, I nudged Starlight. “Come on, let’s get some food.”

Whether it had been curiosity, belligerence, or the mention of a job,

Starlight's attention had been thoroughly set upon Dusty, and she shrugged off my nudge. "What kind of job?"

He mulled the question over for several seconds, as if deciding whether he should answer. Eventually, he did. "Go to a research park. Get computer records from several companies. Bring them here." He idly tapped his hooves together. "Pays five thousand caps. Maybe more."

Starlight's eyes went wide. "Holy shit."

Having less of a sense of the value of caps, I wasn't so startled by the number. I was, however, concerned by Starlight's reaction and the implication that had for Dusty's job. Her reaction didn't suggest that it was a large amount of caps so much as it spelled it out in giant, flaming letters and beat me over the ears with it, all of which led me to one particular question: "What's the catch?"

There was a ghost of a smile, lingering only for a moment before fading into a grimace. "It's raider territory."

A smile slowly spread across Starlight's face. "Ah! And you need ponies to go with you."

"Yeah," Dusty grumbled. "And I don't exactly have the greatest of selection."

Starlight's smile grew into a full-blown grin. "Seems to me you've got a great selection right here. Question is whether we want any part of your job."

His eyes narrowed. "Don't get too full of yourself, kid. I ain't even decided if I'm doing the job, much less if I'm actually going to ask you to come along."

"So you *were* thinking of asking us," Starlight said, full of satisfaction.

"Thinking," Dusty echoed. "Very long and hard."

"It's a lot of caps," Starlight said in a singsong voice.

I couldn't help expressing doubt. "I don't know. I don't like the idea of picking a fight with a bunch of raiders."

Again, that hint of a smile appeared. "Neither do I. But she's right, it's a lot of caps, and with a bit of luck there won't even be any fighting."

I frowned. "I'm not staking my life on luck. And I don't think you

are, either.”

He did smile at that, if faintly. He even exhaled in a way that suggested a chuckle.

“Okay, enough,” Starlight said, nudging out one of the chairs and sitting. “You’re going to ask us to help you, so spill the details. Let’s hear about this job.”

I think it should be pretty obvious to you that I didn’t like where this was going. Still, I figured it was worth hearing out the details. At least then I could give more concrete reasons to decline.

Dusty resisted only a few moments longer before speaking. “That mare Steel pointed me to, she wants me to hit this old compound that was built in the hills south of here. Some sort of community setup by the Ministry of Technology for wartime research. Stable-Tec, Equestrian Robotics, Ironshod Firearms, Crystal Life, and some group called “The Canterlot Medical Research Group”.”

As much as I hated it, he suddenly had my interest. I still thought it was dangerous, possibly too dangerous to undertake, but I now had a much more compelling reason than caps. Money could be acquired through many means. Information, however, was a much more difficult commodity, and Dusty had unwittingly dangled it in front of me. One Crystal Life Technologies facility had been home to members of my hive for two centuries. What might I discover at other facilities?

“She wants me to go to each of those companies’ facilities,” Dusty continued as I took a seat, “and download all their computer records onto a data-store. I bring that back to her, she pays caps. Trick is, it sounds like it was built with security in mind, so some raider band saw the high walls and towers and thought it’d make a great base. We have to get past them.”

“Three of us against a fortified raider band,” I said, frowning. Despite my interest in C.L.T., the information it might net me would do little good if I didn’t survive to use it. “I don’t see this going well.”

“Ideally, there wouldn’t be any fighting,” Dusty said, though I felt he lacked conviction, “but I always plan for worst-case scenarios, and that means being ready for a fight.”

“All right,” Starlight said as she leaned forward, crossing her forelegs

atop the table. "So what *is* the plan?"

"Even *if* I bring you two along, we'd have to be ready for a fight, even if it's just to escape. A big fight, too. There's probably a few dozen raiders in there. Whisper's right; three ponies aren't going to cut it. We need more firepower. I've been thinking all night on it. I've only come up with two ideas, and I don't really like either of them."

"Let's hear them," Starlight said.

Dusty slowly nodded, then raised one hoof. "Option one is to hire some mercenaries. There are lots of ponies out there willing to kill for caps. Problem is, most of them are amateurs, if not outright psychotic, so they could be more dangerous to us than the raiders. Hell, some of them might *be* raiders. I'd want to get somepony professional, like Talon Company. They're good, but they charge it, too. That's a problem. Not much point in even taking the job if we just give all the caps to somepony else."

"Still salvage opportunities," Starlight said. She blinked, and her expression darkened. "Well, unless the raiders all trashed *that* place, too."

"I wouldn't count on salvage," Dusty said. He sat there, frowning for a moment before slowly raising his other hoof. "Which leads us to option two. We hire Sickle."

There was a moment of silence before Starlight expressed my own thoughts, albeit with a touch more profanity than I would have used. "You're fucking kidding, right?"

"There aren't many ponies as good at killing raiders as her," Dusty said. "And she works cheap. Hell, we can probably just let her keep the bounty on the raiders we find."

"Seriously?" Starlight said, her voice rising. "What was all that 'amateur and psychotic' stuff you were saying?"

"She's not amateur," Dusty said. "Psychotic, that I'll give you. I worked with her once. I'd really rather not do so again, given the chance, but I think it might be the best option. She's got some sort of hate for raiders in specific. Not sure why. She... wouldn't tell me."

"Oh, so she's a professional psychotic!" Starlight said, throwing up her hooves. "Oh, well I feel so much better! There's no way some raging sadist that loves carving up ponies would ever turn on us!"

“Hey, I’m not saying I like her or anything,” Dusty said. “I don’t. But the only ponies she kills are raiders and ponies that cross her. Hell, you two broke into her *home* and she just threw you out.”

“After nearly throwing Whisper through a wall! And you saw the bandages she needed after that!”

“Still milder than I would have expected,” Dusty said with a shrug. “Hell, if it was me I might have shot you.”

Starlight stared at him for several seconds before replying, her words dripping with sarcasm. “Wow. Thanks, Dusty.”

“Oh, calm down,” he said. “Walking into my home in the middle of the night to find a pair of armed ponies? Never thought I’d say Sickle showed restraint in anything, but there you go.”

“Doesn’t change that you’re wanting us to work with a psychotic murderer!”

“I wouldn’t call killing raiders murder, Starlight.”

“Well what would you call gutting somepony and hanging them from the rafters!” Starlight shouted. Needless to say, the other ponies in the room were eying us.

Dusty kept his voice much more level and controlled. “Hell, I’ll be the first to say she enjoys killing a bit too much, no argument there. But really, so long as it’s raiders she’s doing it to, I can’t really say I’m too troubled by it.”

“And what about that little colt she killed, huh?”

He grimaced. “...I’m not terribly comfortable about the idea of killing a kid, but you saw that cutie mark same as I did. You have any idea what you have to do to get a mark like that?”

I shuddered, just a little.

The same statement also made Starlight pause. Her mouth moved in twitches, as if trying to come up with words but falling short. Finally, she looked to me for help. “And what do you think, Whisper?”

I frowned, giving a show of mulling it over for a few seconds before speaking. “I think I’m willing to consider the idea.” Starlight’s shoulders slumped, but I was already raising a hoof. “But on one condition: if I think for even a moment that she’s going to cause a problem, we’re out. Gone. Period.”

Dusty nodded. "If I think she's going to cause a problem, I'll be walking out right with you."

Starlight grumbled for a moment, sitting back in her chair and crossing her forelegs. After a moment, she practically spat out the word, "Fine."

"Good," Dusty said. "And I think I'll talk to Amber, see if she'll agree to six thousand." He paused, then added, "Same split as before, fifty-fifty."

Starlight nearly knocked over her chair as she rose. "Oh, fuck you, Dusty! Enough of this half-share crap. We each did just as much as you did on that last job, and you know it. Maybe more! You can either pay us a full share each, *like we deserve*, or you can have fun playing with psycho-mare on your own!"

Dusty stewed over that. I have to admit, as much as I disliked seeing Starlight so angry, I felt just a little proud of how she had maneuvered him. I felt like a predator moving in for the kill as I spoke up. "It's a lot of caps, Dusty. You still get plenty, even if you pay us a fair share. Certainly a lot more than you're likely to get without us."

He looked back and forth between us, remaining silent for several seconds. I could see the battle raging in his eyes, and I could see the moment the lines broke. "Fine," he grunted. "An even three-way split."

Starlight let out a sharp laugh in celebration, while Dusty stood, fishing out a pack of cigarettes. "Think I need a smoke after that," he grumbled. "For some reason, it feels like I just got fucked."

That drew a snicker from Starlight. "Yeah, love you too, Dusty."

He turned to her, meeting her own smug grin with a scowl. "Oh, shut it, kid. I know you two 'not-lovers' are joined at the damn hip, but if I had my way, I'd only be bringing one of you."

"Yeah, you told us," Starlight said, the smug grin growing a bit more.

"Yeah, I did. What I didn't tell you is that if I were to bring only one of you into a fight, it'd be her."

He leveled a hoof at me; Starlight's smugness vanished.

"Seriously?" Starlight said, voice laced with incredulity that, even if it seemed critical of my own ability, I had to agree with. She quickly looked my way as she realized how it had come across. "I mean, hell,

Whisper's great at a lot of stuff, but shooting is kinda my thing and all."

"You're cocky," Dusty said, leaning in over the table. "Overconfidence gets ponies killed, and not just the pony who's full of themselves. I don't care how well you can shoot range targets or trees. I've never seen a range target shoot back, or a tree moving to flank a position. I want a pony who is good in *combat*. You're arrogant and hot-headed." Again, his hoof pointed my way. "I may not be entirely happy with her, but Whisper is cautious, and at least *seems* to think things through instead of acting impulsively. I think she has better hopes of becoming a good soldier than you do."

That was certainly the strangest piece of praise I'd received, and possibly the most troubling.

"Seriously?" Starlight said once again. "Why?"

Dusty shrugged, his response simple and calm after the preceding tirade. "She keeps both eyes open when she shoots."

Starlight stared at him. "...What?"

His expression darkened again. "Yeah, you wouldn't pay attention to something like that, would you? You're so wrapped up in yourself—"

I'd had enough. "Dusty." I didn't shout the name, or even elevate my voice, but I said it with a sharp firmness that caught his attention. His head snapped around to me as I rose from my chair, standing tall and meeting him with a firm stare. It wasn't an angry stare; I kept it level and dispassionate. I didn't want to rile him up even more, but I needed to make it clear how serious I was.

"I may not have much experience with combat," I said, "but I know that in any team endeavor, it's critical for everypony to work well together. Tearing into another pony on the team and encouraging strife is detrimental to the entire group, and if we end up in a fight, it could get us killed. That wasn't constructive criticism you were giving; you were just insulting her. If you want to *educate* us, that's fine. I'd even welcome the opportunity to learn, and if you're polite about it, I'm sure Starlight would, too. But if you continue to be insulting, and putting us all at risk, then we're done."

His jaw was tight by the time I was halfway through my statement. He glared back at me, while I hoped I hadn't misjudged him.

The face-off lasted only a couple seconds. His glare wavered, and his anger crumbled. "...Yeah," he said, his gaze dropping away from mine. "You're right."

He closed his eyes, his muzzle dipping to face the ground and ears folded back. He drew in a deep, calming breath, and let it out again.

I nodded, though he couldn't see it. "Okay. Then let's go see this Amber."

"Yeah," he said, quietly at first. He straightened up again, his expression firm once more. He grabbed the yet-untouched glass of water, downed it all in one long drink, and thumped it back down atop the table. "Let's go talk to Amber."

Behind him, Starlight was staring at us with wide eyes; mostly, she was staring at Dusty's back. When she caught my glance, that expression changed to a wide grin, and she brought her forehooves together to mime clapping.

I gave a tiny smile, and we both followed Dusty.

Our destination was one of the big top-floor rooms, opposite the one we had shared our first time in Rust. Dusty knocked sharply on the door.

A well-spoken but bored-sounding voice answered us. "Who is it?"

"Dusty."

There was silence for a few moments, followed by the sounds of hooves and the shuffling of furniture. After a few seconds the sounds stopped, and the door opened.

The mare beyond had a golden-orange coat, perfectly cared for. The warmth of the color contrasted with the haughty look she leveled our way, which managed to achieve that perfect balance of contempt and disinterest. With the care and styling put into her smooth coat and short but stylishly cut mane and tail, she looked as if she would fit right in among the snobbiest Canterlot socialite.

Beyond her I could see two pairs of saddlebags, with one set large and stuffed with items, and the other set small and fashionable. Both looked brand new, without a hint of dirt or wear. The outfit hanging from a hook beside the bed was practical and sturdy, but apart from a bit of dust looked just as new as the bags. Beside her stood the dresser

that had, moments earlier, been keeping the door shut.

She looked over the three of us before speaking in that same bored tone. "I do hope you didn't bring these ponies in some sort of foolish attempt to rob me."

"What?" Dusty said, blinking. "No, these are some of the ponies coming along for the job."

Starlight stepped forward, offering a hoof and a smile. "Hi. I'm Starlight, best shot you'll find around here. You must be Amber?"

The mare looked down at the offered hoof, but did not return the gesture. "*Lady* Amber," she said, and looked back to Dusty. "I don't particularly care what ponies you decide to subcontract, so long as you meet the objectives I have detailed. Have you decided to accept the contract?"

While Starlight's happy expression slowly withered at the cold rejection, Dusty nodded. "For six thousand caps."

Lady Amber's head tilted just a hair to the side. "I believe we had agreed to a final price of five thousand caps."

"That wasn't the final price," Dusty said. "That was the *starting* price."

"No, the starting price was *three* thousand. I've already been generous enough raising it to five."

"You raised it to five because that's how much it cost to get me to even listen." Dusty replied. "Then I find out you want me to break into a raider fortress, hit five separate objectives, and extract ancient computer records from secure wartime research facilities. Six thousand is a bargain. Talons would charge you twice that or more, which I figure is why you're talking with us instead of them."

She stared back, inscrutable, for several seconds. Then she gave a curt nod. "Very well. Six thousand."

"And one thousand of that will be upfront."

"So you can run off with the caps without even doing the job? I think not."

"So we know you can pay, rather than getting us to do your dirty work only to find out there's no reward."

She considered that for a moment. "I suppose that would be rea-

sonable. However, my patron did not supply me with any caps to offer upfront. Payment was to be conducted after the data had been delivered.”

Dusty’s expression had tightened, his head drawing back a hair as he eyed her suspiciously. “You mean you don’t even have the caps to pay us? You better dig something up. You’re not going to find any mercenaries willing to risk their neck for you unless they know you can pay. Part up front is the way this business goes.”

Amber’s head tilted a tiny bit the other way. Several seconds later, she let slip a tiny smile. “It’s still worth a try,” she said, and the smile vanished. “I should be able to provide your fee from my travel budget. Remain here.”

With that, she shut the door in our faces.

Starlight turned to us with a smirk. “What a lovely and absolutely charming *bitch*.”

Dusty answered with a near-silent snort, as if amused but not willing to show it. As for myself, I allowed a slim smile.

Half a minute later, the door opened again. Amber held a sizable—and spotless—satchel, which she deposited before us. “One thousand caps, plus one very rare data-store. Do not think of running off and selling it; my patron has ways of tracking this device down, and as I’m quite sure you can see, has substantial resources to deal with ponies who become a problem.”

Dusty snorted again. “Wouldn’t be pushing you for a bigger payout if we’re planning on taking the up-front payment and splitting.”

“Unless you planned on using precisely that sort of argument,” she said, eyes narrowing slightly. She returned to her bored expression a moment later. “No matter. This is not particularly time critical, but my patron would appreciate a speedy resolution to this endeavor. Would one week be sufficient?”

“Should be,” Dusty said with a nod, “unless something comes up.”

“Then I will expect you within a week. If that time passes and you have not notified me of any delays, I will assume you’ve broken your word.”

“Won’t come to that,” Dusty said. “See you in a few days.”

“Good,” she said, and shut the door for good.

The moment it was closed, Dusty huffed out a breath and rolled his eyes. “Well, that’s all settled,” he said, then bent down to open the satchel. Inside was a large data-store, probably twice the size of the one I carried. It was one of the rugged military types, made to survive in rough conditions. It sat atop a large number of smaller sacks. There were ten in total, and Dusty pulled out a couple to check their weight. They jingled and clinked as he did so, and returned them to the satchel. There must have been five or six *pounds* of bottle caps in there, and we’d be getting five times as many when we returned.

“This looks in order,” he said, slinging the satchel over his back. “Go gear up. We should head out soon to find Sickle.”

Starlight smirked as we fell in beside Dusty, making our way out. “Such charming ponies you introduce us to, Dusty.”

Even Dusty gave a snort of amusement at that. “Yeah...”



The walk from Rust was much quicker in the dry mid-day warmth than it was in a pounding, night-time storm. The dry ground crunched faintly beneath our hooves, while the faint breeze teased at our manes. The signs of the torrential rain had entirely passed. We saw the land there for the first time; the only familiar part of the journey was the train tracks we followed.

Less than two hours after leaving Rust, we laid eyes on the tiny ghost town. Again, it was a hint of the familiar, even if viewed from the opposite direction. Unfortunately, that familiarity brought with it a growing tension; I knew what lived in these ruins.

So did Dusty. “Starlight. How much punch does that Lancer have?”

She cast a curious glance his way, then looked back to the distant shack that slowly drew closer. “A lot. Tends to blow rocks apart when I shoot them, even fairly big ones. It’d put a hole right through Rust’s gate.”

“Good,” Dusty said, then looked to me. “If this does go bad, our job is going to be keeping Sickle distracted long enough for Star to get a shot. Shoot her, yell at her, whatever. And Star?” He turned her way.

“You’ll get one, maybe two shots before she kills us all. Make it count.”

“You’re not exactly inspiring confidence here,” she replied.

“I don’t think it’ll come to that,” he said as he pulled his rifle from his back, leaving it to hang across his chest—in easy reach. “I just like to be prepared.”

I did the same, and Dusty looked my way once again. “Don’t expect that thing to do anything more than piss her off. Unless you get lucky and put a round right in a joint or something, those bullets won’t get through her armor. I doubt mine will, either. Maybe if I had some AP rounds, but I don’t.”

“Noted,” I said, stifling the tremble that threatened to seize my legs.

The last hundred yards were crossed in silence, save for the jingle and creak of our equipment.

After pausing for a moment to take a breath, Dusty stepped up onto the porch and gave three firm knocks.

A moment later there was a loud thump from within the shack, accompanied by the muffled sound of a large number of bottles knocking together. Then a deep voice called out from inside. “Who the fuck’s making all that noise?”

“It’s Dusty.”

There were a couple more thumps, followed by a much louder one that knocked dust from the wall beside the door. A narrow board halfway up the wall pulled back; in the darkness, I could only catch a hint of movement before it slammed shut. Then the door swung open.

That’s when I first saw Sickie.

Sickie was huge.

I know, I had described her that way from our prior encounter. That time, however, it had been dark, lit only by a swinging PipBuck screen. It had left as much to my imagination as it had shown.

This time, I saw her in the light of day, however overcast it might have been. She stood there without her armor, glaring out at us, as I realized that my imagination might have been lacking.

She wasn’t just big. She was easily the largest pony I had ever seen.

Now, admittedly, I had never seen any of the princesses with my own eyes, but that wouldn’t have changed that statement. I’m reason-

ably certain that only Celestia would have stood taller, but even she wouldn't have come close to matching Sickie in *size*. The closest I could think of was some old stallion who had retired in Appleloosa; in his prime, he had stood nearly as tall as my queen, and was strongly built. Even then, I suspect Sickie surpassed him.

She was large, and she was thick, and she looked like the strongest pony ever.

A bit of a clarification: when I say she looked like the strongest pony ever, I imagine it conjures up different images to different ponies. I'm still getting used to how perceptions have changed since the megaspells, but I know that during my stay in war-time Equestria, many ponies asked to picture an extremely strong pony would think of bodybuilders. They think of ponies with ultra-low body fat to highlight the contours of muscles, with focused exercises that lead to big, bulky shoulders and narrow hips and legs. Personally, as something of a professional in the arts of body alteration and morphology, it's a look that always struck me as profoundly unnatural.

Sickie didn't look like that. She didn't have some perfectly sculpted body. She just looked *thick*. Her hooves were the size of my head, her legs as thick as my chest. Her body was strong and thick all the way through. Some might have looked at the soft definition and the roundness of her belly and concluded that she was fat, but I knew quite well how fat distributes around a pony's body, and that wasn't what I saw on her; what I saw was a healthy bit of padding over an immense, powerful frame. She looked like she might be more bear than pony.

The rest of her appearance was thoroughly rough and rugged. Her coat was a faded pink, wild and unkempt. It was also worn thin around her withers, hips, and a few other places, lingering signs of the heavy armor I had first seen her in. Her mane and tail, both in slightly darker shades of pink, were scraggly, thin, and short. And just for good measure, all of it was dirty and frayed, with the kind of worn-in grime that made me think she didn't even understand the concept of bathing, much less had ever done so.

Her neck was almost as thick around as her head, and her face... well, she showed the signs of wounds all across her body, but it was her

neck and head that bore the most impressive. Old scars left her features jagged and uneven. The left side of her jaw was so scarred up that a fair section was bare skin. She was missing half of her right ear. Her muzzle was lumpy and ever so slightly askew, as if it had been broken multiple times in the past.

Suffice to say, she wouldn't win any beauty competitions, save by threatening to crush the judges.

I also noted that she was an earth pony. Apparently, the horn on her helmet hadn't been to protect a horn underneath.

At least her cutie mark seemed relatively benign: a single, large horseshoe.

The whole powerful, rugged, chewed-up appearance combined to make the glare of pure death she was giving Dusty even more menacing. When she spoke, her voice was deep and rumbling.

"What the fuck do you want, Dirt?"

"It's Dusty. I—"

"I know what your fucking name is!" She snapped, taking a step forward; Dusty took two steps back, and covered the same distance. "I asked you what... what..."

She looked right at me. I could see now that she swayed slightly when she moved, as if off-balance. Her eyes were dilated, with only a faint ring of blue barely visible, and I could see them trying to focus on me as she blinked. Then her expression hardened, and my gut dropped. "You! I remember you, you little cunt! And you!" She looked at Starlight, swaying slightly with the motion. "I told you two bitches what I'd do to you if you ever showed your fucking face around here again!"

Her head dropped, her legs tensed, and my heart started pounding at the inside of my chest. "What the fuck is this, Dirt?"

"It's a job offer!" Dusty quickly answered, holding up his hooves. "That's it!"

She looked square at him, blinking several more times as she refocused. "...What the fuck would I want with a job?"

"Not... not *that* kind of job," Dusty said; he was doing a good job of keeping his voice calm and conversational without devolving into

patronization. Given how hard my heart was beating and the copious amounts of adrenaline burning in my veins, even I might have had trouble remaining so level-headed.

Memories of being held helpless under those giant hooves didn't help. ■
“A job killing raiders.”

Sickle's ears—that is, ear and a half—perked up, and her murderous glare vanished. “The fuck are you talking about?”

“I got a job. Problem is, there's a bunch of raiders where I need to do that job. Raiders got a nice bounty on them. I figure you kill all the raiders and collect their bounty, we do our job, and everypony makes an assload of caps.”

She stared at him for a couple seconds, blinking. Then she smiled. It was a cold smile, so predatory that I would have been only slightly surprised to see sharp teeth. “Go fuck yourself, Dirt.”

Dusty took a half-step back. “It's a lot of caps, Sickle.”

“Yeah, right,” she growled, advancing a step and ducking her head to glare straight into Dusty's eyes. “You want me to kill a bunch of ponies for you? You're going to give me a cut of whatever you're getting for this ‘job’.”

“We'll let you have all the bounties,” Dusty said. “That's a lot of caps.”

“Fuck you! I can kill any raider for a fucking bounty.” Her grin returned. “You want me to go out of my way to kill *these* raiders, then you're going to have to make it worth my while.”

Dusty considered that a moment, doing his best to meet her glare without flinching away, though I could see the tension in his limbs. “Fine; you get a share of the pay, and we all split the bounties.”

“No. I'm going to be doing most of the killing. You little shits sure aren't.” She waved a giant, dirty hoof toward Starlight and myself. “So I get a full share, *and* all the bounties for the raiders you're bringing me along to kill, or you can all fuck off.”

Dusty stared back at her, his brows furrowing. She met the look with a sneer that made her scarred face crinkle up in strange ways.

After a moment of their silent stare-off, Dusty looked over to us. “What do you two think?”

Starlight grunted unintelligibly.

I gave a slightly more vocal reply. "If you think it's a good idea, I would accept that."

He sighed and looked back to Sickie. "Okay. Deal."

Her chuckle rumbled so deeply I could practically *feel* it. "All right. So where are we going, and when?"

"Some compound south of here," Dusty said, gesturing a hoof in that direction. "About forty miles. And I'd like to set out as soon as possible."

Sickie nodded, her eyes blinking several more times as she looked south. "Okay... yeah, okay. Let me get my shit."

She turned around, staggering a little, and disappeared into the shack again, slamming the door behind her.

"Charming," Starlight said, and Dusty grunted in agreement.

It was several minutes, and quite a few thumps and bangs from inside the shack, before the door opened again. Sickie stepped out, to the clinking and scraping of metal. She looked more like I remembered her from our first encounter, but the lighting gave me a much better view. I could tell now just how thick her armor was, and the only places I could see her coat were a few bits of her face and the tip of one ear. That thickness made the dents and dings even more impressive, just to imagine how much force had been applied to it. The armor was as battle-worn as she was.

There were also a set of metal boxes hanging at her sides, like armored saddlebags. It looked as if someone had attached straps to a pair of large ammunition boxes, and then welded medical boxes to those. A few faded flecks of yellow still clung to the metal, despite the many scrapes, dents, and even a crudely patched bullet hole.

The thick-barred muzzle hung from one side of her helm, the other clasp dangling free. She was chewing on something, and her muzzle was wet and dripping; she'd apparently went to drink something and missed. She swallowed whatever it was she was chewing, then shoved the muzzle into place over her snout, latching it in place. "Okay, Dirt," she said, voice slightly muffled. "Lead the way."

With a weary shake of his head, Dusty started walking.

Much to my growing sense of dread, Sickie hung back, right next to me. I tried to ignore how I could *feel* her hoofsteps through the earth. Then her huge, armored head swung around in my direction, the spear-like horn looming dangerously in my direction. In the deep shadows of her helmet's eye-slits, I saw tiny twin reflections of light. "What's your name?"

My voice faltered slightly as I spoke. "Whisper."

"Whimper. Got it." Her head swung over toward Starlight. "And you?"

Starlight looked back with an unrestrained, hateful glare. "It's Starlight."

"Starlight. Star... whatever." Sickie shook her head; her armor clanked noisily with the motion, and she stumbled a little. "Both of you, listen good. When I threaten to do something to a pony, I follow through. Period." I started considering escape routes before she continued. "Only reason I'm not stomping your fucking heads in is because I know Dirt dragged you out here. So I'm letting you two bitches off on a techno-whatsit."

I was wary of speaking at all, but I cautiously replied, "Thank you."

That head swung my way again, a sneer showing behind that muzzle. "You want to thank me, you can stick your snout between my legs and show it. Otherwise, you can fuck off."

Her pace quickened to catch up with Dusty, while I happily lagged behind, having no desire to stay too close to the angry goliath of a mare. Hanging back also revealed that her armor, despite covering almost every inch of her, left her groin bare. I suppose it made sense, as it meant one wouldn't have to remove the armor to relieve themselves. Unfortunately, the observation combined unpleasantly with her prior statement.

Starlight broke the following silence. "I hate her."

I winced, even as Sickie let out a quiet chuckle.



Somehow, we managed to go through the rest of that long and tense day without incident. Little was said. Even Starlight was quiet. She responded to my inquiries with little more than "I'm fine," before

continuing on in silence.

When she looked anywhere but where she was setting her hooves, it was over to our newest traveling companion. Unsurprisingly, Sickle was the focus of my attention as well.

Sickle didn't seem to think much of us, most of the time. She rarely turned her attention away from where she was walking, and on the few occasions she looked at one of us, I could just barely see the corner of her mouth quirk upwards in a smirk under that metal muzzle she wore. At first, those looks were accompanied by a few moments of wavering and focusing, and even the occasional stumble. Those diminished as we traveled, and within a couple hours, whatever impairment she had inflicted upon herself had faded away.

It was around then that I got the impression those glances had changed. While I couldn't clearly see her eyes in the shadows that pooled behind those narrow slits, the little glimpses I could catch suggested a sharp, focused look to my mind. The impaired look of amusement and contempt had been replaced with a more critical expression. I worried whether that was better or worse.

Dusty called a halt as night fell, leading us to a narrow draw on a dry and dusty ridge, where a few dead trees and dry bushes gave a bit of concealment. I was happy to slip off my saddlebags, and we began to unpack our sleeping gear. Sickle was the exception; she simply rolled to her side and collapsed with a tremendous crash of metal. She ended sprawled out, propped up against the stump of a dead tree with her legs splayed in either direction. If it were some other pony, I might have considered the pose silly, or a simple expression of exhaustion. Sickle just made it look lewd.

I hid my attention by busying my hooves with setting out my bedroll, while observing her in the corner of my vision. After getting comfortable, Sickle reached up to undo one of the clasps of her muzzle, letting it swing free to hang from the side of her helm. She dug awkwardly—due to angle, rather than lack of coordination—at her saddlebag cases with her hooves. Eventually she retrieved a large bottle and some jerky. She pried the bottle's cap off with her teeth, spitting it back into the case she had retrieved the bottle from, and took several

deep swallows from it. Then she bit off a large piece of jerky.

She chewed for several seconds before her head lazily rolled to the side to stare at Starlight. She spoke while chewing, spraying a few little bits of half-chewed meat as she sneered. “You got a problem, little bitch?”

Looking over at Starlight, I saw that she wore an irritated expression, though she quickly looked away from Sickle. “You’re disgusting,” she said, keeping her glare focused on her own bags as she unpacked.

Sickle gave a dry chuckle, and followed up by gratuitously scratching an armored hoof at her crotch. “Yeah. And?”

Starlight’s ears pinned back, her blanket freezing in midair. I quickly stepped in to. “Hey, Starlight? Do you—”

Sickle’s hoof shot out, pointing straight at me; even with plenty of distance between us, I flinched back. “Fuck off, Whimper,” she said with a sneer. “We’re talking.”

When she turned her look back to Starlight, the smaller unicorn met her with an unflinching glare. “I saw what you did at the depot.”

Sickle’s head tilted to the side as she continued to chew on her jerky for several seconds. “Uh-huh. What depot?”

“That army depot,” Starlight clarified. “The one where you butchered all those ponies.”

After a moment more of thinking, Sickle shrugged. “I dunno. That doesn’t really narrow it down, much, does it?”

“What, you butcher that many ponies?” Starlight said, her voice rising. “It was a week ago, a warehouse in the middle of the desert with a bunch of—”

“Oh, yeah!” Sickle said, breaking out in a big grin. “Hell, that was fun.” She took another bite of her jerky. “So, what about it? You got a problem with killing raiders?”

Starlight recoiled a bit, but continued on. “I’m fine with killing raiders,” she said. “I’m not so fine with somepony sticking their bodies on a pole like some sort of fucked-up flag.”

Despite the criticism, Sickle was chuckling. “Oh, you saw what I did to Pike, huh? Yeah, she was a fun little bitch.” Her chuckles ended as she tilted her head, smirking at Starlight. “Guess you didn’t see her

cutie mark, then? I know I left one of her hind legs laying around there.”

Starlight glared for a couple seconds before replying through clenched teeth. “There wasn’t enough left of them to see it.”

I paused in my unpacking, a package of food in my hooves. I wasn’t sure if wanted to eat with the topic at hoof.

“Ah, too bad,” Sickle said with a rumbling chuckle. “You’d recognize it. Just a gutted pony’s body on a spike. She liked to do that to ponies. I thought it’d be all ironic-like to do that to her.” She made a quick, thrusting gesture with her hoof. “So I stuck her own spear up her cunt and left her on display.”

I grimaced, placed the food back in my pack, and closed it.

“That’s fucking disgusting,” Starlight said, trembling, which just made Sickle smile more.

“Yeah. And?” She gave a deep, rumbling laugh, ending when she turned up her bottle and chugged the rest of its contents. She sent the bottle flying through the air to crash to the ground behind her, and continued. “Ain’t like she was some fucking saint or some shit. She’d put up whole caravans like that, just to show others what she did when they didn’t pay her toll. Hell, sometimes she’d do it even if they could.” She sneered once more. “Bet you’d change your mind if you saw a whole bunch ‘a little blank-flank colts and fillies on display, with poles jammed up their asses and out their mouths, all because ma and pa didn’t have enough caps.”

I shuddered, unable to hold back a whimper at the vileness she conjured up—which, naturally, appeared to amuse Sickle, given the moniker she had chosen for me. Even the horrors I had seen did little to take the sting out of what she described. I like to think that I avoid poetic license when possible, but I felt like it hurt something deep inside me to hear such an atrocity spoken of so plainly. The many levels of wrongness required to reach that state were the sort of thing that could drive a thinking person to despair.

Starlight’s voice drew me out of my inward focus. She trembled, looking faintly queasy, but managed to fix Sickle with a glare once again. “I saw the colt *you* killed.”

“Huh?” Sickle said, helmet tilting again. “What colt?”

“At the depot,” Starlight said, the tremble fading from her voice. “The one you kicked through a—”

“Oh!” Again, Sickle grinned in recognition. “I remember that little shit now! Hah, yeah, that’s a good one. I was thrashing the place, and some pony charges me from behind. I gave him a quick kick, only it sends the fucker straight through the wall! So of course, I’ve got to check it out, just to see, you know, what the fuck? Yeah, he was dead. One kick. But it gets even better! Ends up this little fucker came at me with a knife. A tiny fucking knife!” She broke out laughing, thumping a hoof against the ground.

When her laughter finally died down, Starlight spoke up again, though quietly. “It’s still disgusting.”

“Heh. Kid was a raider. He deserved it.”

“Aren’t you a raider, too?”

Any hint of amusement Sickle had was gone in an instant. Even her chewing stopped. When she spoke, her voice was low and quiet. “I ain’t a fucking raider,” she said. “Not any more.”

“*Were* a raider, then,” Starlight clarified; despite the sudden change in tone that had set me on full alert, she didn’t waver at all as she met the monstrous mare’s glare. “Does that mean you’d deserve it if I killed you?”

Her bags still floated in her magic, but just behind her, I noticed that her Lancer was wrapped in the same magical glow, half obscured by her body. My heart hammered inside my chest, as I moved my shoulder forward. A quick twist would bring my rifle to where I could hold it; the question was whether I could possibly do so in time to matter.

After a couple seconds of silence, a grin slowly spread across Sickle’s scarred muzzle. “Yeah, I guess I would. You going to try it?”

Another stretch of silence.

Finally, Starlight relaxed ever so slightly. The Lancer slid down, resting on the ground behind her. “Not today.”

“Then quit your bitching,” Sickle said, still grinning as she laid her head back against the tree.

On the opposite side of our small camp, Dusty resumed laying out his own bedding.

I sat next to Starlight as she finished unpacking. She grumbled a little, and I tried to be comforting just by being there. I couldn't think of anything useful to say, at least not with Sickle lying right there. Her bad mood faded a bit as she ate. After a while, I was even able to stomach a bit of food, and shared one of the snack cakes I had stashed away during our celebratory dinner. By the time we were done eating, she gave me a weak but appreciative smile.

Meanwhile, Sickle ate a bit, drained and tossed another bottle, and downed a couple pills. After latching her muzzle back in place, she settled in to sleep. By the time we were done eating and ready to sleep, her head was lolled to the side, drooling as she snored.

While Dusty sat vigilant to take the first watch, Starlight and I tucked into our simple beds.

Minutes later, when I had almost drifted off to sleep, I heard her quiet whisper, barely audible.

"Whisper?"

I cracked open an eye to see her, lying on her side and looking at me, worry etched into her expression.

"Yeah?"

She swallowed, eyes wandering before returning to me. "...I'm not really comfortable with where this is going."

"Yeah. Me neither."

She gave a ghost of a smile, as if appreciating that I felt the same way, but it faded as quick as it came. "Do you think she's going to cause a problem?"

I had to consider that. There was so much I didn't know, and Sickle was throwing in all-new complications. Despite that, after a moment of thinking, I answered honestly. "No. I think she's just having fun riling us up. I don't think she'll cause any real problems. And if things do take a turn for the worse, we'll get out of it together."

I smiled, gently and comforting, and she eventually did as well.

"...Thanks, Whisper."

I gave a tiny nod, and she tucked her blanket in around her, her eyes closing.

I settled in to sleep once more. We still had a long couple of days

ahead of us.

Chapter Nine

Paradise

Do raiders love?

It seems such a bizarre question on its face. From everything I had seen and heard, raiders are barbaric beyond all belief. These are ponies who rape, torment, torture, and kill, all for their own amusement. Such acts even became something of a social dynamic among them; the more depraved and vicious you were, the more respect you commanded from other raiders, and the higher your status. It was little wonder that those who led their own bands, like Pike, were the most horrible of the lot. In their vile social structure, it was how they gained standing.

So they had social dynamics and concepts of respect. They obviously enjoyed certain things, as horrible as those things often were. It seemed reasonable that they would have a degree of interest in their companions for them to have banded together. But did that extend to the kind of appreciation that would place that other pony on a similar level as themselves, or was it entirely selfish? Were raiders capable of loving anything but their own self-interest?

These were the kind of thoughts I had as I peered through Dusty's binoculars at a watchtower, while the pair of raiders within grew increasingly frisky.

We all lay on a low ridge, several hundred yards from the tower in question; all except Sickle and her heavy, noisy armor, whom we had left another hundred yards back. In the growing darkness of twilight, we would have been practically invisible, even if the raiders had been looking our way. It gave us plenty of time to observe, and I looked on with interest.

I was hungry.

The day had been long and quiet. Despite the friendship I had fostered in Starlight, she had been so focused on Sickle that she had spared hardly a moment of thought toward me. Even when we had halted in the early evening a couple miles from our destination, to wait for nightfall, I had hardly gotten a nibble out of her. So, I watched the

pair of young stallions in the tower, and silently contemplated whether I might be able to get any love if I impersonated one of them.

Not that I thought I'd have any chance of doing so, or that I would dare try, should the opportunity have presented itself. Sneaking off from my group without arousing suspicion would be difficult enough. Infiltrating theirs would be even more difficult, especially done blind. I could maybe catch one alone and forcibly feed upon them, but even that posed significant risk of discovery. I didn't plan on doing any of these things, but when one is hungry and walking by a buffet, one can hardly be blamed for looking. So I looked, and thought.

Was there any love to be had, there? Some might have looked at the way one of the ponies roughly handled the other, pinning him in place and biting, and concluded that there was only self-interest, but I knew things weren't always so simple. Both were clearly enjoying themselves, but that didn't answer whether that enjoyment was entirely self-centered or not. Did they care at all for the other pony, or were they simply using each other for their own personal pleasure?

"Enjoying the show?" Dusty quietly whispered from beside me.

"Thinking," I replied, and presented a different reason for my interest. "If all of their guards show a similar lack of discipline, we might be able to pull off a silent infiltration."

I lowered the binoculars to pass them back to Dusty, and looked over the compound as a whole.

Paradise Beach made a mockery of both parts of its name.

Five office buildings, multi-story structures of crumbling concrete and broken glass, formed a semicircle around a large, muddy pond. The sandy desert earth around the pond was dotted with debris, with the occasional picnic table and the tattered skeletons of old beach umbrellas. The rusting remains of a skywagon lay half-submerged in the pond, and a large neighborhood of ruined houses were set across from the offices. A few service buildings were set on the pond-side of that neighborhood; I saw what looked to have been a restaurant, a store, and a few other buildings I couldn't immediately identify.

Circling the compound was a concrete wall, worn and cracked by the years. Automated defenses had long since broken down or been

stripped for salvage, leaving skeletal frames and scorched craters where they had once topped the walls. A pair of crude towers had been erected to take up the task of watching over the facility, one over each of the two opposing gates. The gates themselves bore the name “Paradise Beach” in letters that had once been bright and colorful, but were now faded and chipped.

Other than the two broken-down guard shacks by each gate, the only building outside of the wall was a small loading facility to service the rail line that led up to the place. A train lay crumpled and broken past the end of the rails, having plowed through the barrier at their end and gone crashing into the barren field beyond.

While the pair of ponies entertaining themselves in one of the towers were the only raiders we saw, there were plentiful signs of their presence. Long metal poles outside the entry gate were decorated with bones, lashed in place with wire. The decayed corpse of a pony hung from another pole that protruded from what had once been a store. The flickering firelight from within that and the neighboring restaurant were the only lights to be seen, and seemed to suggest that the raiders had holed up there. No lights came from across the compound, near the dark and silent office buildings.

The whole place was set in a shallow bowl between a few sandy hills, one of which was currently host to us.

Dusty was sweeping his binoculars slowly over the rolling terrain to our right, looking for an ideal approach. “It’s a lot of ground to cross, and the cover could be better, but we’ll have the darkness on our side. Say... fifteen minutes to get there? Probably more, if we’re darting from cover to cover.”

“I’m not sure if they’ll be busy that long,” I said. “They hadn’t gotten properly started yet, so I’d say they’ll be busy for at least five minutes. How much longer, I couldn’t say. Fifteen minutes may be pushing it.”

“And it’d be longer because we would need to get Sickie, too.” He sighed, lowering his binoculars again. “Okay, salvage experts. How long do you think it’ll take to locate, break into, and download the entire server in five separate research offices?”

Starlight shrugged, still peering through the sight of her Lancer. "I don't know, probably a few minutes each? Plus getting into the place and moving. Maybe an hour?"

"And worst case?" I asked.

She lowered her Lancer, considering that for a moment. "An hour each?"

"Shit," Dusty muttered. "Would have liked to wait a few hours for their guards to get bored and sloppy, but that would be cutting things a bit close for comfort. Scoot back; we're getting Sickie and moving in."

We slid back on our bellies until we were behind the crest, then rose to trot down the slope. Sickie was sitting, waiting for us. "You done sightseeing yet?"

"Yep," Dusty said. "Scouted out a route that should get us there. Let's go."

"About fucking time," Sickie said as she stood.

As she walked with us, her armor clattering and clacking with each step, Dusty talked us through the plan.

We made our way around the next hill, reaching a shallow draw several minutes later. We slowed, crouching low as we moved. It felt silly to do so when Sickie's crouched shuffle was about as tall as I stood normally, but we did so anyway. The quietness of our advance and the young night made Sickie's armor sound all the louder in my ears.

Eventually, we reached a point where the draw faded away into the slope of the hill. We stopped at a pair of scraggly bushes Dusty had spotted before, while he pulled out his binoculars.

While we were much closer to the wall, and therefore the tower, I couldn't make it out well in the darkness. I saw what looked to be one of the stallions' heads, but I couldn't be certain. We were below its level, and couldn't see what lay below those walls.

Dusty lowered the binoculars again, trading it for his rifle. "I only see one of them, but his back's to us. Star, you're up."

As he lay beside the bush, peering down the sights of his rifle at the tower, Starlight grinned. "Got it," she said, and crouching low, scurried up to another bush, a third of the way to the wall. By the time she got there, she was just a silhouette in the darkness. That silhouette dropped

to the ground, lying halfway behind the bush. A faint glow of magic brought her Lancer forward as she sighted on the tower, winking out a moment later.

"She's in place," I whispered.

"Good," Dusty replied around his bit. "Whisper, go."

As planned, I moved quick and low, my rifle's grip held in my teeth. I passed right behind Starlight, who remained focused down her sight, and continued on. My eyes were locked on the tower, ready to throw myself prone the moment I saw any movement. None came, and finally the broken top of the wall blocked it from view. I sat beside the wall, looked back, and gave a little wave.

Sickle was uncomfortably conspicuous. Her metal armor stood out against the sandy ground, if only a little; a ghostly image when compared to the silhouettes of Dusty and Starlight blending seamlessly into the ground around them. As she moved, I could already hear the quiet jingling of her armor, though only faintly. It made for an agonizing wait as I sat there, worried that the raider would notice us at any moment.

Slowly, she drew closer, and closer, and I finally let out a sigh of relief as she reached the shadow of the wall behind me. Her armor rattled one more time as she made a rude gesture Dusty's way. It wasn't the wave Dusty had suggested, but it got the message across.

Dusty didn't move. After several seconds, I gave a wave, but there was still no motion. I was starting to get very worried when his silhouette finally drew back and rose, shuffling quickly toward us.

When he arrived, he gave a quick wave to Starlight before whispering, "Damnit, Sickle, I said to stop and hide if he looked your way!"

"Fuck off, Dirt," she rumbled, rather less quietly. "I didn't see him do shit."

"Quiet!" Dusty hissed. "Anyway, we're lucky. I don't think he saw anything, and he lost interest pretty quick. We should still be good."

"Then quit your bitching and let's go."

Dusty's jaw tightened, but I assume he recognized how arguing about it would only make things worse. He remained silent for a couple of seconds, until Starlight slipped in next to us, and then motioned for

us to follow him.

We crept along the wall for a couple of minutes, until we reached a point Dusty had scouted out. Beside a pillar that had once housed an automated turret, the wall was cracked and partially crumbled. While most of the wall stretched a good ten feet over our heads, the crumbling gouge was only about five.

Starlight was up once more. With a nod from Dusty, she slung her Lancer and rushed forward; her hooves clattered only faintly against the wall as she sprung up along it, hooking her forehooves over the rim. She hauled herself up until her chest rested against it, and then went still, her hind legs dangling. She remained there for several long seconds before scrambling up all the way, perching atop the wall, and motioning for us to follow. Then she disappeared over the top.

Sickle grumbled a bit as she sat beside the wall, giving Dusty the opportunity to climb up atop her shoulders on his way up the wall. I followed as soon as he was over. I felt incredibly uncomfortable stepping on Sickle, my hooves clunking against the metal plate over her shoulder; that discomfort edged toward outright fear when I heard her growl beneath her breath. My scramble over the wall top was quick and not terribly graceful. Fortunately, I landed on my hooves.

Sickle merely rose up on her hind legs, grabbed the top of the gap, and hauled herself over. Her armor scraped noisily against the concrete and clattered loudly as she dropped to the dirt beyond. I heard a sharp, wincing exhale from Starlight at the sound.

The space beyond the wall was mostly dirt and dead vegetation, save for the large plazas behind each of the office buildings with their assortment of benches, fountains, and barren planters. We quickly followed Dusty to a mass of dead vegetation lying at the rear of one of the plazas and settled in, waiting. Dusty looked forward, scanning across the back lots, while Starlight watched back along the wall.

Satisfied that nopony was coming yet, Dusty scooted back. "Okay, from here on, we move in buddy teams. Star, Whisper, you two are basically inseparable anyway, keep that up. Sickle, you and I stick together. Never split up, watch out for your buddy, that sort of thing. Okay?"

We agreed, and he nodded. "Good. I'm thinking we hit the offices in order, unless anyone thinks differently?"

I leaned in, whispering. "Stable-Tec should be our first target. We need access to computers for this, and they did a lot of computer research. If we're going to find anything that makes our job easier, it'll be there."

He nodded. "Sounds good. Which one is the Stable-Tec office?"

Starlight lowered her gaze to her PipBuck, flipping to the map. After a moment of searching, she raised a hoof. "That one, the second building."

"Good," Dusty nodded. "We move from cover to cover, short bounds. Move around the back of the plaza, then to the rear door of the building. Star, Whisper, lead us out."

Adrenaline started to tickle at my hooves again as we rose, darting forward almost silently to another set of dead bushes. This time, though, it was more familiar. More exciting. I felt like I was in my element, sneaking about behind everyone's back, searching for hidden information to steal without anypony being the wiser. It wasn't too different from how it was during the war.

I tried to ignore the fact that it would probably be just as bad if I were caught, too. Maybe even worse.

We stopped at the bushes, looking out across the plazas. Still nothing.

Another quick bound, and we passed the first office's plaza entirely, continuing on until we could hide behind a planter at the back corner of the next. We waited as Dusty and Sickle moved up to the corner we had just left. Dusty set up there, his rifle resting across a bench; he'd have a clear line of sight across the entire courtyard.

With him set, we moved again. Our advance wasn't quite as silent as we moved across the paved square, our hooves clacking quietly on the cracked and uneven concrete. We moved from planter to fountain to bench, pausing as Dusty and Sickle moved up to the corner of the plaza, keeping the distance close.

Slowly, the dark, empty pits of the building's broken windows drew closer.

Starlight and I halted at a low concrete wall just outside the rearmost doorways. The broad, full-length windows and glass doors had long since been smashed out, leaving a gaping dark chasm inside the building.

Behind us, I heard the clacking of Sickie's spiked shoes on the concrete as they moved up.

Then I heard a sharp clatter from between the two offices.

I lurched and quickly gestured with a hoof. I don't know if Dusty reacted to my gesture or if he heard the sound himself, but he immediately dropped down beside a planter, and a moment later Sickie crouched as well.

Silence filled the air. Then it was broken by the clacking of hooves on concrete; the sound of a slow, walking gait.

A couple seconds later there was a missed hoofbeat, then another, and the sound stopped.

I glanced Dusty's way. I could barely make him out in the shadows, but I saw him raise a hoof to gesture downward. I assumed he meant to stay put, and gave a tiny nod.

We crouched and waited, and soon I heard the faint sound of the dry earth crunching under-hoof; there was a pony drawing closer. The hoofsteps clacked louder as he stepped onto a paved walkway again. A moment later, I heard the pony, a stallion, start to hum a tune.

Moving slowly and smoothly, I lowered my rifle until it hung on its sling, released the bit, and drew my pistol; I took my time silently slipping off the safety, and leveled it at the edge of the wall.

The hoofsteps drew closer. Starlight edged backward, toward the far corner of our cover, as it became apparent the incoming pony was going to walk right between Dusty's position and our own.

The raider came around the end of the wall, and I aligned my sights over the center of his chest.

I never fired. A loud clatter of metal on concrete interrupted us; the raider had just enough time to let out a startled, "Huh?" before Sickie slammed into him, her head lowered. Her armor's horn jutted out of the raider's side as she bore him back against the wall. I scrambled back as she reared up, lifting him atop her head, and then threw him down, his body slamming meatily into the concrete right in front of me.

He managed a single, wet gasp before one of her hooves pressed down on his throat. It was an almost gentle gesture, but that didn't help the raider. I watched in horror as his hooves grappled and pressed at Sickle, clattering against her armor, while the sucking wound in his chest gurgled with his attempts to breathe.

Sickle lifted her other hoof, and he tried to shove it away as she lowered the leg-mounted blades to his chest. His efforts made no impact on the hoof's slow descent, even as she slowly pressed the twin blades into him. He flailed and struggled, landing a couple good kicks against her chest, but she didn't even flinch. It took only moments before his struggles started to lose coordination, ending with a few weak fumbles before his hooves stilled, slowly sliding down her legs.

Sickle lifted her hoof, and the raider gave a faint sigh as the last of his breath left him. One foreleg shifted a little, as if to curl up over his chest, but it never made it.

Sickle turned to me, flecks of blood glistening on her helm. "See?" she rumbled. "I can be quiet."

I stared at the fresh corpse, breathing as hard as if I had been a part of that struggle myself. I recognized him: one of the raiders who had been in the watchtower. He was skinny and ragged, with a few scraps of leather worn as a crude vest. Fresh bite-marks adorned his neck and shoulder.

Mind you, my shocked reaction had nothing to do with the pony being dead. I had been fully prepared to end his life myself. What I had not been prepared for was the sheer violence of his demise.

Dusty hurried up beside us, his expression tight. "Get inside before someone comes looking!" he whispered. "And bring the body, we need to hide it!"

Sickle chuckled as she picked up the raider, throwing him limply across her back. I reengaged my pistol's safety and slid it back into its holster, and we hurried toward the darkness of the building.

"Watch for glass," Starlight hissed as we approached the doors, and we slowed, stepping carefully and nudging glass out of the way before putting any weight down; nopony wanted to catch a shard of glass in the frog. The exception was, naturally, Sickle, who simply walked right

in, glass crunching harmlessly under her spiked shoes.

I could barely make out the details of the dark chamber. Several tables with attached benches filled the space, scattered about. A few were knocked askew or broken. Ceiling panels had fallen, leaving debris scattered across the floor and revealing the even darker void beyond the false ceiling. Sickie walked deeper into the room, to a long counter; the room must have been a cafeteria.

We approached the counter, ducking behind it as Starlight floated up her PipBuck and turned the screen on again; while its light could give us away, we also needed it to see. It faintly illuminated the space, and gave just enough light to see the bits of paint that still remained on the walls. It looked like the walls had once held a woodland motif. Now, the cracked and faded remnants among the long expanses of worn gray seemed to mimic the wasteland that Equestria had become.

Sickie dumped the dead raider behind the counter, then paused, looking down at him. "Hey, I know this little fucktoy," she rumbled, giving him a firm poke with her hoof. "Well, shit! This must be Gutrip's gang. This little bitch was always sucking on Gut's hooves."

Starlight looked up from her PipBuck. "Gutrip? Well he sounds pleasant."

"It's just a stupid name," Sickie said with a rumbling chuckle. "He's just a big dumbass with a big gun. Some giant drum-fed piece of shit he calls 'Chomper'. Something about the bolt; I don't know. He's way into that gun. Hell, I'm pretty sure he's fucked the damn thing. About the only other thing that gets him up is gutting ponies." She shrugged. "He likes to think he's big and strong and nasty, but he's just a little bitch. Lousy fuck, too."

"This isn't going to be a problem, is it?" Dusty asked.

I could only barely see the wicked grin Sickie gave under her muzzle. "Naw," she said, raising a hoof to show off the bloodied blades. "I think I'll have fun gutting him, just to see how much he likes it."

"Great," Dusty dryly replied. "Okay, let's move. Somepony's going to come looking for this guy eventually. We need to find their server. And be careful with that light, we don't want to draw attention."

"If speed is the issue, we need a map," Starlight said, turning her

PipBuck's screen down until it gave only the faintest of glows. "Best bet would be a lobby or the like. Otherwise we might have to hunt around and check everywhere to find those servers."

"Lobby it is, then," Dusty said. "Lead on."

The going was slow. Despite the spacious design of the building, it was pitch-black once we were away from the outer windows, forcing us to rely on the faint glow of Starlight's PipBuck to pick our way through the debris and rubble.

Fortunately, the hall leading out from the cafeteria led straight to the main lobby. It was a towering open space ringed by the balconies of each level. During the day, before it had fallen into decay, it would have been a warm, pleasant space, with its glass wall and roof. Right then, it just felt exposed. We could see the flickering lights of the buildings across the central park.

We waited while Starlight slipped out to the cluster of counters and information displays. It was a couple of minutes of silence, with only the occasional clopping of hooves and rattle of debris being moved.

When she returned, she was carrying a thin object, a placard pried from one of the information displays. She led us back into a small interior room and turned up her light.

It was one of those typical "you are here" maps, with a directory listing what each room was. Starlight's hoof ran down the list, eyes darting back and forth. "Security office is right across the hall, should definitely check that out first. And I'm seeing two computer-related sections. There's 'R&D' on the top floor, and 'Data Services' here on the first."

"Data Services sounds like the server area," I said, looking at the map. After a moment, I placed the tip of a hoof down on the first-floor diagram. "In fact, that looks like it's probably the server room itself." I moved my hoof to the fifth floor. "But I'd like to check out that R&D, too."

"I don't want to get bogged down with side-trips," Dusty said. "How long will it take to get what you need in R&D?"

"I'd be looking for hardware, mostly," I replied. "An access tool would be ideal. Barring that, a portable terminal, debug cables, stuff

like that. Should be pretty obvious. Maybe a couple minutes to do a quick sweep, plus however long it takes to get in there.”

Dusty cocked his head to the side, giving me a funny, questioning look. “You do a lot of hacking on your farm, huh?”

“Just an old terminal my mom found. Mostly I read a lot of computer science books.” After a moment of consideration, I quietly added, “And maybe a few spy novels, too.”

After all, looking competent was good; looking *too* competent was suspicious.

“There’s a stairway just around the corner,” Starlight said. “I’m more concerned about power, though. You can’t do anything with a server if it doesn’t have power.”

Dusty blinked in the darkness. “Shit.”

I looked to Starlight. “Do you think a server would have a backup power source?”

I already knew the answer, of course. She slowly nodded, thinking. “Yeah, I guess they usually do. Those kinds of things tend to last well, too. Okay! Security room, up to R&D, and back down for the server?”

We agreed—Sickle merely grunted—and stepped out of the room.

Our quest for the security room ended almost immediately. Starlight pulled on the handle, but it refused to budge. The keypad beside it was dark, and made no response to its buttons being pressed. The cracked dome of a security camera hung silently above it, reflecting the light of Starlight’s PipBuck.

“I could cut it open,” Starlight said, “but that’s not exactly subtle.”

Sickle snorted, clopping a hoof against the floor and grinding a small piece of fallen concrete into dust. “Or I could just kick it open.”

“Maybe it’ll power up with the server,” Dusty said. “Leave it, we can come back later.”

Starlight muttered under her breath, but led us back down the hallway. The stairway door was just before the cafeteria, and opened much more readily than the security office, impeded only by a small heap of debris on the floor.

Hoofsteps echoed throughout the stairway as we slowly made our way up, dominated by the deep, metallic clacking of Sickle’s shoes.

There was less debris here, just bits of grit that had fallen from the bare and cracking concrete walls. There was also less light; no windows shone into this interior space, and even though Starlight turned her PipBuck up, it still left half the space cloaked in shadows.

Starlight turned down the light again once we reached the top level, and cautiously cracked open the door. We followed her out into the hall, decorated with crumbling murals of grassy fields and happy ponies. Another camera, minus its dome, hung from the ceiling.

The door to R&D had the same kind of keypad the security room had, but it didn't matter; the door itself lay askew, hanging from a single hinge, with deep dents all around the handle where someone had rammed it. I followed Starlight through, while Dusty and Sickler remained outside. "Make it quick," he said, crouching beside the wall and sighting down his rifle in the direction we had come.

Once we were inside, Starlight turned up the light again. I scanned across several desks. The grassland motif continued here as well, cracked and peeling. Dust covered everything. Four vending machines lay torn open against one wall, their cracked signs advertising Sparkle-Cola and Sunrise Sarsaparilla. Bottles lay discarded around the room.

A quick look over the desks revealed nothing interesting. Even the terminals were mostly smashed, save for one in the back corner. Without power, it was just as useless.

We moved on through the opposite door to sweep through the rest of the section, moving from room to room.

The place was trashed. Two hundred years of constant decay and sporadic scavenging had left the darkened offices in shambles. Desks and tables lay scattered about the rooms, many of them damaged or broken. The debris littering the floor was different; less broken ceiling panels and crumbling bits of concrete, more discarded electrical components and prototyping breadboards. If I spent a few hours collecting various bits and pieces and sorting out the ones that still work, I might be able to make something out of it; a crude radio or clock, for instance. Nothing worth the time spent in hostile territory.

A rack of cables, bolted to the wall under a chipped painting of a pair of ponies frolicking in a meadow, drew my attention. A few

seconds of sorting through them left me disappointed. They were all standard terminal connectors, nothing special. I still tucked a set into my bags, just in case.

Shadows swept along the walls as we moved, industrial-grade blank gemstones and other electrical components crunching under-hoof. The sickly green light glinted off broken terminal screens as it struggled to illuminate the dark, cluttered spaces. In the poor light, I almost missed our first good find. I had to call Starlight back to shine her PipBuck under the broken desk to find what I had glimpsed.

Lying half-buried under a set of prototyped circuits and half an office chair was a thick case. It was a fair bit larger than the medical box I carried in my bags, and much heavier, but infinitely more valuable: a portable terminal, one of the old models that was crude in comparison to the later PipBuck portable terminals, but which still carried sufficient functionality for basic diagnostics. It would serve my purposes.

The case was badly cracked and dented, but not warped to the point I would expect internal damage. I wiped the dust off and opened the top panel to reveal its keyboard and a small screen, with a thin crack running through the top right corner.

I flipped the power switch. Nothing happened.

"Battery probably died," Starlight whispered, her horn lighting up as she rooted around in her bag. "Pop open the case, let's see what it uses."

I closed the lid and turned it over to pry open the battery access panel. Once I had, Starlight pulled out the large battery. "Heck of a spark-pack on this thing," she said, lifting it up to squint at the writing along its side. "Ah, good. This should work."

She floated over a fresh battery to slide into its place, and I sealed up the panel again. I flipped it right-side up again, opened the screen, and flipped the switch.

This time, I was rewarded by the quiet whirring and clicking of the computer starting up, and characters started scrolling across the screen.

I set it atop the desk to finish booting and rooted through the debris below. After a few moments of searching, my hooves found a strap among the trash. Pulling on it rewarded me with a torn and ratty satchel, but it wasn't the bag itself that interested me. What interested

me was the contents, including a full set of debug cables and a small toolset specialized for computers and electronics. Sadly, the data-store inside the bag was badly damaged, with its case broken in half and bent. I doubted it would still work, but I kept it, just in case I was wrong.

The portable terminal had finished booting up. A quick check revealed what I had suspected; it was a very, *very* simple device, with practically no storage capacity and a spell-matrix gemset that was bordering on antiquated well before the megaspells dropped. Still, it was sufficient for my purposes. I turned it off again, closed the screen, and took its carrying handle in my teeth.

We continued on, quickly scanning through the rest of the place for anything obvious, but not wasting much time at it. Every minute we spent here was another minute spent in raider territory, and I for one did not want to drag it out longer than absolutely necessary.

The one place we did pause to search was a small PipBuck research office, but our hopes were low of finding anything useful. It was even more ransacked than the rest of the offices, to the point where the tool cabinet had been pried from the wall and carried away, leaving a blank spot of bare concrete in the crumbling imagery of sunny fields. Still, the PipBucks were one of the most advanced pieces of arcano-tech ever developed, so we spent a minute to scour the place.

We found nothing. No abandoned PipBucks, no diagnostic or access tools, nothing. Not even the specialized keys needed to unlock them.

When we slipped out of the office again, Dusty glanced my way, keeping his rifle fixed down the hallway. Seeing the case I was carrying, he asked, "Find what you were looking for?"

"Yes," I said. "I should be able to get past any security the servers might have with this and a bit of time."

"Good. Let's get to it, then."

We returned to the stairway, and by it, to the ground floor. From there, Starlight led us slowly through a couple halls, until we arrived at a door labeled "Data Services".

Stepping through, we found ourselves in what looked to be a secretary's office. Beyond that were more offices, and a single heavy, keypad-

locked door labeled “Server Room”, watched over by another camera.

Dusty frowned before turning to me. “Any way you can use that thing to hack the lock, or whatever?”

“That’s not really the kind of electronic device that you ‘hack’,” I replied around the portable terminal’s handle. “Especially not without power.”

“Just shut the door to the hall,” Starlight said, pulling out her cutting torch and goggles. “It’s an interior space, no windows for anypony to see this.”

Dusty nodded, moving back to shut the door leading out to the rest of the offices.

We sat and waited while the cutting torch cast the place into sharp relief of light and shadow, and seared flashes of the room into our vision. When she finished, she slipped her implements back into her bag before pulling out a pry bar. “Hey, um... Sickle? Could you help catch this so it doesn’t make a bunch of noise? Please?”

Sickle gave a sharp snort within her muzzle. “Yeah, whatever.”

Once she had moved into place, Starlight wrenched on the pry bar. A moment later the door’s cut hinges slipped apart, and the bottom of the door settled to the ground with a thud. Sickle caught the top edge easily, and lowered it to the ground. Even dropped from just an inch above the ground, the door produced a deep thump on landing.

Sickle’s hoof clanked noisily atop the door. “You know, I don’t get nearly as much caps if this stays all quiet-like.”

Frowning, Starlight slid the pry bar back into her bags. “You don’t have to fight if it stays quiet, either.”

“Yeah,” Sickle replied, chuckling darkly. “Have to’. That’s a good one. ■

Dusty stepped in. “You want to be paid for the job, you have to do the job. Right now, the job is staying quiet. Got it?”

The huge, armored head slowly turned toward him—he backed up half a step—and fixed him with a stare that lasted a couple seconds. “Yeah. I got it, Dirt.”

She turned away again, leading the way into the server room.

The place was filled with a half-dozen large arrays. Arcano-tech gemstones glittered in the green light, nearly hidden behind the circuitry

and mess of wires. The servers looked intact, if horribly dusty.

"This looks like what we want," Starlight said, trotting to the back corner of the room. An array of spark batteries were mounted to the wall, just above a tiny spark generator. She searched around for a bit, finding the power switch for the generator. She reached for it, then paused. "I don't know how obvious it will be, once I flip this. This thing shouldn't put out much power, but it might turn on a few lights."

I set down my newfound portable terminal, opening the screen and turning it on. "I'll be as quick as I can, then we can shut the power down again." Pulling out the collection of cables I had gathered, and looking over the ports of the server, I selected the correct one and plugged it in.

Dusty set Lady Amber's data-store beside me, then returned to the doorway. He crouched, leveling his rifle down the hallway and out of my sight. Sickie sat behind him, unreadable beneath that helm.

When my terminal finished booting up, I nodded to Starlight. "Ready."

She nodded back.

"Here we go."

The spark generator whirred as she pressed the button. Red lights appeared above the spark batteries mounted above it, rapidly switching to green. The servers thrummed, crystals lighting up, and the servers' boot-up text started scrolling across my terminal's screen.

A small screen beside the spark-battery array lit up, as well. It was small, but the text was large enough for me to read.

Server Power Management System V1.32

Alert: operating on backup power

Primary power system *offline*

Attempting reset...

A deep thump sounded faintly beneath us, and a vibration ran through the floor. A loud beep sounded, followed by the clunk of electrical switches engaging, and the the room was suddenly bathed in light.

The small power-management screen blinked out a new message.

Reset complete

Primary power system *online*

Dusty drew back from the doorway, blinking against the sudden brightness. “Every damn light in the building just turned on!” he hissed. “How long is that going to take, Whisper?”

“Unknown,” I said, squinting at the screen as the messages continued to scroll. Somewhere, in another room, a shrill tone sounded for a couple seconds, likely some form of alarm about the electrical system. “The servers are still booting, and I have no idea how much data we’ll need to transfer.”

Music had started playing from nearby, filling the air with energetic beats and electronic sound. It sounded much like the kinds of music DJ Pon3 had made; it was another flash of nostalgia for a world dead for centuries, even if I didn’t recognize the song itself. Not that I spent much time focusing on the tune, even before Starlight hurried over to turn off the player. I kept my focus on the screen of my terminal, waiting as the servers went through their laborious startup procedure.

The boot-up finished.

With another keypress, I attempted to connect to the server. A password request appeared on my screen. I hit another key, and watched over the flood of data that flowed through the servers’ spell matrix.

I was hunting through that data when the gunfire started. It was distant, faint pops echoing through the many hallways to barely reach our ears. A muffled explosion rumbled like distant thunder. I cast a glance to the doorway; Dusty was still crouched there, silent and unmoving as he peered down his sights. Sickie was still sitting beside the doorway. I caught her grin before she latched her muzzle back in place, slipping a pill bottle back into one of her armored saddlebags.

Dusty must have noticed my glance. “How much longer?”

“Just getting the login,” I said, eyes returning to my screen as I selected the relevant piece of data from within the spell matrix.

“Make it quick,” he said. “We’re backed into a corner, here.”

“Maybe not!” Starlight called out from the back corner of the room.

I looked her way to see her standing by an open floor hatch, grinning. "Looks like this goes down to a service level. We might have another way out."

"Good," Dusty said, and I flashed her a smile before turning back to my screen. The servers had accepted my meddling and allowed me to log on.

I plugged the data-store in and typed a quick command. "Files are transferring."

"How long?" Dusty quietly asked.

The gunfire had stopped

I looked at the list of files rapidly scrolling across my screen. "Hard to say," I said, keeping my voice low. "It's thousands of files." I watched the text continuing to scroll again before I felt like hazarding a guess. "Should be only a couple minutes."

Path and file names started to slowly climb upwards through the alphabet as we waited.

We were nearing the end when, without a single word or sound of warning, Dusty opened fire.

I cringed, ducking halfway behind one of the server assemblies as he fired most of the magazine in a long string, before slowing and firing in shorter bursts. He ducked back, and I glanced down to my screen. I couldn't be sure exactly how many more files were left, but it had to be getting close.

I looked up in time to see Dusty chuck something around the corner before calling out, "Down!"

The moment after I tucked myself against the base of the server, the grenade he had thrown went off. It wasn't a deep, rumbling boom like in the radio plays. It was as sharp and sudden as a lightning bolt. I felt it in the floor, in the *air*. The lights all blinked and flickered, making my gut wrench with adrenaline, but a quick glance at my screen showed that the servers had continued on just fine.

"We're running out of time!" Dusty shouted back as he slammed a new magazine home, cycled the weapon, and took up a firing stance once more; the hallway beyond him was much dimmer now.

"Almost there!" I replied, my words feeling mushy in my ears as

I clutched my terminal.

The scrolling list of files stopped, leaving me at a command prompt.

"It's done!" I called out, pulling the cable and data-store free to toss into my bags.

Dusty stepped back from the doorway. "Move!"

Starlight disappeared down the hole as I shut the screen of my portable terminal and picked it up in my teeth. When I got to the hatch, I cast a glance back at Dusty. He had stuck his muzzle into a large pouch. A moment later he pulled back, a metal disk clenched in his teeth. He hit something on the top with a hoof, then chucked it beside the door.

That's a mine, I realized, and hurried down the open hatch.

I nearly fell in my haste, slipping on the short ladder, but made my way safely to the small, subterranean room. A single orange light dimly lit the space, with its bare pipes and electrical conduits. A door was set into one wall.

Dusty followed moments behind me, and finally Sickle squeezed her bulk down the hole, grumbling the whole way.

"Shoulda just fought them," she growled as she reached the bottom, with all of her sharp metal protrusions making the small space seem even more claustrophobic. "Instead of all this chicken-shit running."

"Patience," Dusty said. "For now, we need to keep moving."

"One sec," Starlight said, somehow squeezing past Sickle and climbing up the ladder. She pulled the hatch shut—Sickle hadn't bothered closing it—and jammed a piece of metal into the latch on the bottom.

She slid back down, hopping past Sickle. "Okay, now we can go," she said, and took the lead once again. She opened the door and stepped out, while Dusty trailed close on her heels, rifle at the ready.

The pipes and conduits continued down the tunnel beyond the door. We walked, bits of rubble crunching under-hoof. The hum of generators grew louder.

We were halfway down the tunnel when a deep, muffled explosion shook the ground, casting down a soft hail of dust and dirt from the ceiling. Most of us stayed silent. Sickle gave a single dry chuckle.

The tunnel eventually ended with another heavy door. It opened

onto a platform overlooking a much larger access tunnel, which stretched off to either side. Four spark generators were set in a row across from us, three of which were humming along happily. The sound of machinery thrummed from all directions. Most of the sound came from a door labeled “Utilities”, just beside the path we had emerged from.

When we reached the edge of the platform and the metal stairs leading down, we saw that the main tunnel was flooded.

Starlight halted and grimaced. “That’s... really not good.”

Dusty halted at the top of the stairs. “What? What’s wrong?”

“That,” she said, pointing to the water. “The water. You can’t see where you’re stepping.”

“We’ll just have to be careful, then,” he replied, but she gave a sharp shake of her head.

“*Very* careful,” Starlight said. “That’s got ‘infection’ written all over it. And who knows what you could step on under there. You know what tetanus does to a pony?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Sickie growled as she shoved past Dusty and made her way down the stairs. “Move your asses already, I’m ready to be done with this shit.” She waded out, unconcerned about underwater obstacles with her heavy shoes. Then she paused. “...The fuck way are we going, anyway?”

“That way,” Starlight said, sighing as she gestured to our left, and reluctantly followed. She dipped her hoof gingerly into the water, only to jerk it back as if bit. “Holy shit this is cold,” she said as she slowly slid it in again. The water reached up to her knees.

I took a moment to fully power down my portable terminal before entering, and craned my head back to keep it lifted well clear of the water. Starlight was right; the water was icy. The dank, stagnant smell suggested it wasn’t very healthy, either.

Starlight muttered as we went. “We’re in the middle of a desert. Where did all this water come from?” She snorted, and immediately answered her own question. “It’s probably rainwater. At least that should mean there’s a way out.”

We waded through the muck, while the few working lights struggled to illuminate our path. The splashing of our movements echoed

down the damp tunnel. I winced every time my hooves bumped into something with my shuffling steps. Some were rocks or other hard objects. Occasionally, it was squishy.

After a hundred yards of wading through the muck, we came to another set of stairs, leading up to another platform. We happily made our way to dry land, shaking off the cold water and stomping our hooves to shake off the muck that clung to them. I felt foul, and made a note to not touch my face until I'd gotten the chance to wash my hooves thoroughly. I idly wondered if Emerald stocked soap.

One door led out from the platform, locked with a keypad and festooned with warning signs. The most prominent declared the space beyond as property of Equestrian Robotics, warning that all unauthorized personnel would face not just potential prosecution for trespassing and possible espionage during a time of war, but also the lethal security systems intended to protect the facility, its workers, and the nation they served.

All in all, a fairly standard warning in wartime Equestria, as depressing as that is.

Unlike the keypads we had encountered before, this one was now powered. Starlight stepped up, her tools already floating before her. "Give me a minute, I got this."

As she pried off the keypad's case, Dusty looked to me. "Cover the rear. They might follow us, and if we can catch them knee-deep in water, all the better."

I nodded, moving back to the top of the stairs to lie down, my rifle pointed off down the dimly lit tunnel. I stared off into the gloom, listening to the thrum of machinery and the clicking of Starlight's tools.

A faint buzz sounded from the door. "Got it!" Starlight declared, followed by grinding as she pulled the door open.

In the next instant, there was an angry beep, a sharp yelp of surprise from Starlight, a clatter of hooves, and an ear-hammering blast of gunfire. I spun around to see chips of concrete flying as bullets sailed through the open doorway to blast chunks out of the concrete pad beyond.

"Turret!" Starlight called out as she scrambled away from the door-

way and turned around. Her hind-leg nearly went out, and she turned again to look back at her flank. "Oh shit," she said, her voice oddly calm. "It hit me."

My heart lurched, blood running cold.

She turned in a circle, trying to get a better look at her flank, staggering when her right hind leg barely supported her. I scrambled up as her flank came back into view. At first, she looked uninjured. It took me a moment to notice the wound, a tiny blemish just in front of her cutie mark. She lifted her hoof to continue the turn, the muscles of her thigh flexed, and blood flowed from the wound in a thick surge. "Oh shit," she repeated, her hoof stepping down again, and she staggered again; this time, her leg gave out and she toppled over.

"I got shot," she said, eyes wide and staring as Dusty and I hurried over to her. "It shot me. Oh shit, it shot me!"

The moment Dusty's hoof touched her side, she jerked away. "Don't touch it!" she shouted, horn lighting up to shove Dusty back; I had to give her credit, she could put a good amount of force into it. The shove sent him staggering back to fall on his rump. "You'll get it infected! Oh shit, shit, shit..."

He was immediately up, hurrying back over, though he didn't put a hoof on her just yet. "You're bleeding," he said, as I came skidding to a halt by Starlight's head. She had rolled onto her side, wounded flank up; the wound was still for a moment, but then the blood flowed again, pulsing with her heartbeat. "You're bleeding bad," Dusty corrected. "Bleeding first, then infection."

Starlight was already pulling open her bags, digging out medical supplies. "I can fix this. D-don't touch it, you'll get that m-muck in there."

"Settle down," Dusty said, pulling out a pouch of his own. "Calm down, stay still—"

"No, I need—*fuck!*" Starlight yelped and jerked as she tried to move her leg. Dusty placed a hoof on her thigh, below the injury, and she seemed too distracted by the pain to object.

"Settle down!" Dusty said. "You know the deal: combat time means listen to me. Now settle down."

Starlight breathed through gritted teeth. Lacking anything more productive, I placed a hoof comfortingly on the side of her neck.

"We need to stop this bleeding," Dusty said. "It's bad enough I'm not going to trust anything short of a healing potion. You could take one now, but that'll heal the bullet inside you; you'll need surgery to get it out, and it won't be pleasant. Or, I can try to get it out now. Which will it be?"

Starlight's leg jerked again, making her cringe, and Dusty moved a hoof to put pressure directly on the wound, adding, "Make it quick, or I'm deciding for you." Her response was a choked whine, and after a moment, her horn lit again, digging through her medical supplies to pull out a set of forceps, which trembled in her magic. Dusty caught its handle in his teeth and turned to her wound, while she pulled out a familiar pair of bottles, setting them beside her head, ready to use.

"Okay," Dusty said around the forceps. "This is going to hurt, but I need you to stay as still as you can."

He lowered his head, bringing the forceps toward the wound and moving his hoof away. Blood covered the underside of his hoof, flowing down the curve of Starlight's thigh. She tensed beneath my hoof. Then she yelled out. "Wait!"

Dusty jerked, pulling back and placing his hoof over the wound again. He looked her way as her magic grabbed at her medical supplies again. This time she produced a sealed hypodermic needle. She pried the cap off the needle, the tip wavering as she brought it to her thigh.

"Let Whisper do that," Dusty said around the forceps, his hoof still pressed to the wound.

The needle halted as she looked up to me. I didn't need any more prompting; I leaned in, gripping the body of the needle in my teeth, then brought it to her thigh, several inches up from the wound. "Is here good?" I asked around it, and when she grunted and nodded, I leaned in further. The exposed inch of thin metal brushed past her fur and slid easily into her flesh, and I pressed a hoof to the thin plunger to deliver the dose. She hissed faintly, but otherwise remained still.

Finished, I slid the needle back out, taking the time to replace the cap before setting it aside.

Starlight sucked in several deep breaths while Dusty waited patiently. Finally, she nodded. “Okay. Do it.”

The hoof pulled back again, and Dusty lined up the forceps. She tensed, and I gave a gentle squeeze. Then the tip of the forceps slid into the wound, and she hissed, gritting her teeth. As they slid in further, that hiss turned into a low growl.

There was a sharp clunk of metal on concrete behind me, and Sickie snorted. I turned my head her way, momentarily losing any common sense as I shot a harsh glare at the brutish mare that could kill me with casual ease, but she wasn’t even looking at us. Instead, she was turning away and walking toward the door.

Just before she got there, she lowered her head, and her steel-shod hooves cracked against the concrete floor as she sprang into a full gallop, charging down the hall and out of sight.

The same angry beep sounded, followed immediately by the sound of gunfire. I jerked in surprise; somehow, Dusty did not. The gunfire was matched with the deep thunks and pings of bullets striking thick metal, until it was replaced with the tortured sound of metal tearing and a ratcheting sound, like gears grinding. That lasted only a second before there was a loud *pop*, and Sickie shouted, “Fuck!”

Dusty kept the forceps remarkably stable as he called out, “If you just got yourself shot, you’re going to have to wait your turn.”

Sickie’s reply echoed down the hall. “Fuck you too, Dirt.”

Focusing on his work, Dusty slid the forceps in deep enough that his muzzle was almost touching Starlight’s thigh. He bit down on the grips, and I actually heard metal scrap faintly on metal as Starlight cringed. He had to back out a bit, parting the grips once more, and tried again; this time, it clamped down on something.

Starlight growled louder as he pulled, finally blurting out, “That’s not the bullet!”

“It is,” Dusty assured her.

“It’s not—*Gah!*”

Dusty pulled free. Starlight’s growl of pain faded to deep breathing as she looked up at him.

Clasped in the forceps was the remains of a bullet. The front

of it had been completely smashed in and flared out wider than the base, looking more like a mushroom than a bullet. It was also smeared in blood.

Dusty set the forceps down beside the other medical supplies, then pulled a small, sturdy vial from a pouch; a healing potion.

“Wait,” Starlight said, her attention finally pulling away from the bullet. Her magic grabbed one of her bottles, floating it in a shaky grip. “Gotta sterilize. Clean. No infection.”

Dusty took the bottle, then frowned. “You shouldn’t use this on open wounds,” he said, and after checking the other bottle, quickly swapped them. “This will do.”

He popped open the cap, squirting the fluid into the wound. Starlight hissed a little, but remained still. The fluid washed away most of the blood, and Dusty used a bit of gauze to wipe around the wound. Then he brought the healing potion out and removed the stopper. He poured a little of it into the wound, then passed it to me. “Have her drink that,” he said as he grabbed a magic-laced bandage, pressing it to the wound with a bloody hoof.

Starlight blinked a few times, having difficulty focusing on the potion I held out to her. I hoped it was the painkillers dulling her senses, rather than blood loss. Her horn lit, taking the vial, and she downed it.

After a minute of waiting, Dusty peeled back the bandage, washing away a little more blood to get a better look at the wound before pressing it back into place. “Okay. Bleeding’s stopped, or close to it.” He retrieved a roll of gauze before turning to me. “Lift her hind leg so I can wrap it.”

Starlight spoke up. “I can lift—ow!” She gritted her teeth again, her leg dropping again.

“And that’s why I asked Whisper to do it,” Dusty said, keeping his hoof on the bandage. Starlight grumbled something under her breath as I scooted down, gently sliding my forehooves under her thigh and knee to lift the leg up. I was met with the wet feeling of blood.

There was a lot of blood. Not an excessive amount, mind you. There was no spreading pool of it beneath her. It wasn’t enough that

I worried for her life. Still, it was enough to be concerning. The entire front of her thigh was slick with blood, and it had run down her lower belly to her other leg. It seemed like so much blood for such a tiny hole.

I was relieved to see the corner of her mouth quirk upwards, despite all that. “Hey, Dusty?”

“Yeah?”

“Your bedside manner sucks.”

He paused in his wrapping. Then he laughed softly, his hooves resuming their task. “Hey, I thought I was being nice. I even gave you a say in your treatment. Medics don’t usually do that, you know.”

She chuckled a little, while he finished up. I gently set her leg down again, then wiped my bloody hooves against the ground. It didn’t do much good.

Sickle returned, grumbling as she wiped at her muzzle. I reflected that, with her blades washed clean by the flooded tunnel, the violent “ex raider” was possibly the least bloody of the group.

And we had only just started.

Dusty noted her return as well. “You okay over there?”

“No,” Sickie grumbled, snorting. “I’m going to be smelling burned hair for the rest of the day. Fucking spark battery blew up in my face.”

“Yeah,” Starlight murmured. “You got it so hard over there.”

Sickle snorted again, and I honestly couldn’t tell if it was annoyed or amused. “Fuck you. At least I’m not lying down to take a nap.”

“No taunting my patient,” Dusty chided, retrieving a bottle of water from his bags. He splashed a little of it on Starlight’s legs and belly before wiping at her coat, crudely cleaning her.

“Hey, watch the hooves,” Starlight mumbled, then blinking and refocusing on the water bottle as he set it in front of her.

“Drink the rest of that,” he said. “You’ll need to stay well hydrated, even with the healing magic doing its work.”

Once she had downed the remains of the bottle, he crouched beside her, moving in close. “Okay, let’s see if we can get you upright.”

It took surprisingly little effort to get Starlight on her hooves again. She was able to rise on her own, wobbling only slightly against Dusty’s side. Putting weight on her leg made her wince, but she weathered it.

Her speech came slowly, as if she were thinking out each word. "Yeah... yeah, I think I'm good now."

"You sure?" Dusty asked. "You're sounding a little out of it."

"Yeah," she said, blinking several times. She gave an abrupt shake of her head, followed by a little stumble. "Those painkillers are really good. I'm fine, just... a little slow."

Dusty frowned, but nodded. "And you can walk?"

Starlight took a deep breath, then moved one hoof forward. One after another, she walked, wincing only slightly when she stepped with the wounded leg. "Yeah. Yeah, I can walk. I'd just rather not go very fast."

Dusty was frowning again. "We may not have that option. Can you hustle if needed?"

Starlight lifted her leg, slowly moving it back and forth, flexing it, and finally setting the hoof back on the ground. "I should be good, yeah. Might just be a little cranky afterwards."

"Good enough," Dusty said. "Keep a healing potion handy, and down it if the bleeding starts up again, or if you're having trouble keeping up."

She nodded.

Dusty slowly looked around at us, then nodded as well. "Okay, enough drama. We need to get moving. Keep an eye out for the raiders and any other turrets. Let's get this done."

The turret had been a ceiling-mounted model. After its encounter with Sickie, it had been reduced to torn shards of metal and scattered ammunition, and the air was filled with the smell of burnt electronics. Though they looked like the same caliber of round that my pistol fired, we didn't pause to collect it.

Past the turret was a set of stairs, leading up to another door. Our little subterranean excursion had brought us to ground level again.

Dusty cracked open the door to peek out into the sparsely lit hall beyond. We could hear something sparking in the distance, and a once-pleasant tune echoed quietly through the halls, warped into something sinister by damaged speakers.

Once Dusty opened the door enough for me to see out, I found myself even more concerned. The place looked like a warzone. Most of

the false ceiling had collapsed, with sections of the frame hanging at odd angles. Only a few of the ceiling lights still worked, often hanging in the partially collapsed frame and struggling to light the ruined spaces. Bullet holes and scorch marks riddled the walls. A broken robot, one of those creepy models with a biological brain, sparked and smouldered a short distance away. The scent of cordite and ozone hung thick in the air.

Somewhere, far in the distance, I could hear a short bout of shouting. I hoped that meant their attention would be elsewhere. It sounded like it came from a different building, though I couldn't be sure.

Dusty pulled back. "We can't go into the lobby to swipe another map. If it's anything like Stable-Tec's, they'd see us easy. We're going to have to move quietly and search for the servers. Make sure you can't be seen from any windows; we're going to be pretty lit up here."

We—Starlight and I, that is—nodded in agreement. Sickie merely grunted again.

Slipping out of the door, we moved slowly down the ruined hall, looking in every door. Every room we found was trashed. Desks were overturned or broken. Papers were scattered and burnt. In one office, the ceiling had completely given way, with twisted rebar barely holding the collapsed concrete together to form a crude, steep slope leading upstairs, and a heap of ruined desks and office dividers piled at its base. We passed it by, though I made note of it, just in case.

The hall led to a common area. Once, it might have been a pretty and restful location, with several benches and tables, all made of metal and concrete. The lone working light instead cast a gloom over the dust and debris-covered furniture.

We were halfway through the space when gunfire erupted, a series of sounds so rapid that they seemed to blend into one. I caught the light of the muzzle flash down a hall to our side as I threw myself to the ground behind a bench. My world became incredibly small for a moment. I was barely aware of Starlight dropping beside me. The gunshots hammered at my ears, echoing off the walls of the chamber. Chips of concrete flew through the air, peppering me.

The gunfire paused. My awareness expanded enough to become aware of Dusty behind the next bench, rising to bring his rifle up. An-

other burst of gunfire sent him ducking again as bullets tore chunks out of the concrete benches we hid behind, throwing dust and fragments through the air.

The instant the burst finished, Dusty rose, snapping off a short burst in reply, the sound pounding at my head. He immediately ducked down again as another blast of gunfire peppered our cover.

I had only just shaken off the shock and recognized that I was a part of the fight when my ears finally picked up the sound of an angry yell. A moment later the yell was above me; in the dim light, a silhouette loomed above me in mid-leap, a long piece of metal glinting as it came down at me.

Sickle surged forward, and the raider's leap crashed to a halt in mid-air as his chest met her waiting blades. She swung him up, over her head, and threw him to the ground hard enough that he bounced, his body gone completely limp with the impact. Another burst of gunfire erupted from down the hall, producing deep thunks as it impacted Sickle's armor; there were no sparks, as I had half expected, but even in the dim light I could make out a couple puffs as the bullets shattered on the metal plates. I felt something slap against my shoulder, jarring my attention back toward the fight.

I grabbed the bit of my rifle as Dusty fired another short burst. I rose just enough to get the weapon over the back of the bench when the return fire came; I saw the flash from down the hall, and suddenly all I could see was a spray of gray dust and flying bits of concrete. I jerked back, dropping behind cover again. The bullet had struck right in front of my face! If not for that bench, I would have died!

Something light slapped against my side again, and I looked back to see Sickle fastening her muzzle again. I looked down to see what had hit me. An old, faded inhaler lay on the ground beside me.

I had seen that sort of thing in Appleloosa, so long ago. The smuggling of zebra drugs through the town had been one of the more interesting aspects of my work, and had led to a fairly casual understanding of contraband pharmaceuticals. While at the time I couldn't be certain exactly what the inhaler had contained, the most immediately obvious assumption was Dash.

As Starlight raised her Recharger to send wild shots in the general direction of the shooter, Dusty yelled back, his voice sounding oddly mushy in my ears. "Sickle! We need your help, here!"

"I *am* helping!" she bellowed in reply, while repeatedly stabbing the dead raider in the neck with her leg-blades and emitting a disturbingly un-ponylike snarl of gleeful rage.

With adrenaline coursing through my veins, I rose again. This time, I twisted to get my rifle over the back of the bench while exposing as little as possible. Aiming was impossible, but I reasoned that hardly made a difference; I'm not a terribly good shot to begin with. I made up for it by simply holding the trigger down, answering the incoming fire with the roar of my own.

The instant the bolt slammed shut on an empty chamber, another blast of gunfire peppered our position. Dusty fired off a short burst of his own, momentarily drowning out everything else, but was forced behind cover as a new gun opened up; the sound was deeper and slower, and the impacts chewed chunks out of the concrete bench, rapidly tearing away at Dusty's cover.

I was halfway through swapping out magazines when Sickle stepped over me. "Fucking *catch!*" she roared, throwing the severed head of the dead raider, while bullets smacked into her armor.

I was informed later that she hit one of the shooters square in the face.

Then she leaped over the bench and charged, snarling like a wild animal.

And she sounded *happy*.

Dusty was up immediately, and Starlight and I followed his example. I was up just in time to see Sickle lunge through a doorway. There was a flash of light from within, a short, rapid burst of gunfire, and the gun fell silent. Dusty quickly moved forward with his smooth, gliding walk, rifle leveled unerringly down the hall.

A deeper gunshot sounded from around the next corner, the muzzle-flash bright in the dim space. It was answered with a bel-low from Sickle. "Motherfucker!" The gun fired again, this time a long burst as the pony held the trigger down. The muzzle-flashes

cast a strobe-light over the scene as Sickie barreled out past the end of the hallway to charge the shooter.

We reached the corner just two seconds later. Dusty snapped to a halt, aiming his rifle around the corner while hardly exposing himself. Myself, I skidded on the scattered grit and rubble, sliding out a bit further before halting my progress. I was just in time to see Sickie throw her head to the side, flinging a stallion off of her armor's horn and into a wall.

Flashes lit up the hall past her as more ponies opened fire, and several more moved around. It was all a vague blur as I scrambled back behind cover. Behind the fusillade of fire, I could only barely hear Sickie's answering roar.

Dusty pulled back. "Star! Take this corner, fall back if they push you. Whisper! On me!"

With that, he bolted back down the hall we had just come down, and I rushed after him.

The gallop slowed to a brisk trot as we entered the common room again and turned right. I understood his intention, then; he was moving around behind the group we had just seen.

A silhouette came running around the next corner of the dark hall, something long clasped in their teeth. Dusty's rifle barked twice, and the pony's run turned into a tumble. Dusty continued on, slowing for only a moment as he neared to point the muzzle at the scrawny mare's head and fire once more, the muzzle-flash searing the image of her dazed expression into my eyes.

He slowed again as he reached the corner, dropping into that smooth, gliding walk as he turned into the next hall.

I heard the distinct pop of Starlight's Lancer, and a red glow lit up the wall at the end of the hallway, slowly fading as whatever she hit burned away. It was followed by several quieter pops and flashes of blue.

Dusty broke out into a trot again, dodging around a broken table and another fallen robot. He halted at the corner, casting a glance back to make sure I was right behind him. Around the corner we could hear more sporadic gunfire, and another sharp Lancer discharge.

With just a nod for warning, Dusty raised his rifle and rounded the

corner, and I followed.

He was firing before I had cleared the corner. Sharp, single shots rang out in rapid succession. I only got a vague impression of the space when I stepped out. Wide, tall, dimly lit, with many obstacles. Dusty had continued moving out, mostly perpendicular to the direction he was shooting, which left me with a clear line of fire.

I was not nearly as controlled and professional as Dusty. I saw a cluster of ponies, tongued the trigger, and didn't release until the hammering retort of my rifle fell silent. For two seconds, the entire world was thunder and blinding light.

When the magazine ran dry, nearly sending me staggering as the pounding pressure suddenly ceased, I blinked against the spots in my vision. Past my dazzled vision, I could see Dusty advancing through the upturned tables the raiders had been hiding behind, pausing to put another round into one of the fallen ponies.

I numbly fumbled my way through reloading. I was on my last magazine.

The room looked to be another cafeteria, littered with broken tables and buffet lines. Several ponies lay scattered around the closest tables, near where the halls led into the open space. They might have been good cover from the direction Starlight had been, but it had left them completely unprotected from our attack.

A deep, powerful gunshot echoed from another room, louder than any gunshot I had heard before. It was immediately followed by loud crashes of metal. Dusty's head snapped around, back toward where Starlight watched from a corner, and we quickly moved that way.

It wasn't hard to tell which way Sickle had gone. Even through the devastation that gripped the entire building, the wake of fresh destruction was clear. A door lead into a surprisingly well-lit kitchen, revealing another raider lying broken atop an old, crushed oven. Bones jutted out from a mangled leg, his muzzle flattened and bloody, his back and neck twisted at unnatural angles. Another raider lay beside a bent rebar spear, her hooves clutching her neck as she tried to stem the flow of blood pouring past her hooves and into the spreading puddle beneath her.

Dusty leveled his rifle at her head and fired. The mare's whole body jerked, and her head seemed to deform in the most disturbing way as the round pulverized her skull.

Over the growing ringing in my ears, I heard Sickle bellow again, followed by another loud crash of metal.

We hurried to the far side of the kitchen and out the broken metal door to find Sickle grappling with a large white stallion. He wore a metal breastplate and a battle saddle with a huge, bulky gun on it, though I couldn't make out many details as they rolled around.

As big as he was, it was clear he was no match for Sickle. She rolled over and smashed him into the side of a table, then rolled over on top of him to pin him to the ground. Her hoof raised up, slamming down into his face. He reeled, hooves punching at her side. She hit him again, smashing his muzzle in and slamming his head against the floor. Blood splattered across his pale coat, and his struggles subsided to merely clutching her in his weakening grip.

Evidently deciding she had things under control, Dusty moved past her to another table, setting up to look past it. We were at the edge of the building now, by a set of wide windows, and he aimed out of those. Lacking any better idea of what I should do, I figured I should follow his example.

The gurgling, angry cry from the stallion drew my attention back moments later. He was struggling again, but it wasn't until I saw Sickle pull her hoof back that I saw why; blood dripped from her blades as they rose from his belly, entrails glistening from within the long, ragged gash.

She looked like a true horror, a monster. She stared face-to-face with him, blood smeared across and steadily dribbling from her helm as his struggles slowly weakened, hooves sliding on blood-slicked metal plates. His eyes fluttered as his head sank down again, legs slowly going limp as consciousness faded.

I simply stared, too numb to act.

The crunch of grit under hoof snapped my attention back to the world, and I spun around, only to halt myself as I saw Starlight approaching. She wobbled a little as she looked at Sickle, who sat panting over the downed raider, then back to us. "Did we get them all?"

Dusty spoke without turning from his position. “Star, smash those lights behind us, then set up watching toward those other buildings. If there are any others, they’re going to come running.” I turned back to the windows, squinting in the darkness. I could only just make out the silhouette of the Stable-Tec offices next door.

A moment later, the light behind us popped, lighting the area with a small shower of sparks before plunging us into darkness. Absent the surrounding light, I quickly started to pick out more details of the grounds outside. The hulk of a giant sentinel bot sat a short distance away. One of its legs was entirely removed from its hull, lying a short distance away.

“Holy fuck,” Starlight said behind us. “What the hell did you do to him?”

I cast a glance back to see Sickle wobbling as she rose; the raider beneath her was clearly dead now, his entrails slopped out of his thoroughly mauled belly. “I had some fun with him,” she said, her voice thick and wet. She coughed several times, and spit up a wad of bloody phlegm, which struck the bars of her muzzle and clung to them, dangling there. Blood continued to dribble from her chin. “Besides, serves him right. Fucker tried to shoot me in the ass.”

In the gloom, I caught the glint of light as Starlight’s eyes changed focus. “Uh, it kinda looks like he *did* shoot you in the ass.”

Sickle craned her head around, turning around as she tried unsuccessfully to look at her own rear. I got a much better view as she turned, seeing the blood glistening on the metal plate covering the inside of her thigh.

Unlike when Starlight was injured, I found myself completely unconcerned.

Sickle staggered, and flopped down on her side with a crash of metal. Sprawling out on her back, she finally got a better view. Her response was to laugh again. “Shit, he did. Hah! He shot me in the ass!”

Starlight frowned down at her, blinking. “There is something deeply wrong with you.”

“Shut up,” Dusty hissed. “There’s two more coming.”

We quickly took our places, peering out into the darkness. On the

walking path that ran along the front of the towering offices, two dark shapes moved, bobbing in a slow trot. They were perhaps a hundred yards away.

Dusty took only a moment to appraise the situation. "I have the lead pony. Star, you have the second one. Whisper, keep an eye out for anypony else, suppress them if they try to engage us. Star, take the shot when you're ready."

The silence that followed lingered, dragging on. Then there was a flash, momentarily blinding me as the Lancer's crimson beam tore through the air. The ponies were illuminated for an instant as the second one flared red, his chest burning away. Dusty fired on the other, the sharp gunshots echoing across the compound and off the walls of the other buildings in a rolling din as he put out five shots out at the lead pony. By the time he was done, the area was dark again; the pony's silhouette lay unmoving on the dark path.

"Star, put a shot into that guy, just to be sure."

She looked to him, a look of concern flashing across her face, but she turned back, raising her Lancer's sight before her eyes once more. Several seconds later, there was another hissing pop and flash of red, and a spray of red embers rose from the fallen pony, burning away in the night.

There was a deep thump behind me, and I turned to see that Sickle had removed her helmet. Her face was bloodied, with a fresh gash covering her cheek; the blood that still dribbled from her chin was her own. She poked at the cut with a hoof, then chuckled. "Woo! Now that was fun," she said, before choking and coughing again. This time, she spat up a much larger wad of congealing blood, and her hoof moved to press at the side of her armored but blood-smeared neck. "Shit, I think one of those fuckers got me in the throat."

She didn't engender the greatest show of sympathy or concern from any of us.

Starlight gave a questioning look. "So... do you need first aid or something?"

"Nah," Sickle wetly rasped as she clumsily dug at one of her armored saddlebags. "It'll take a lot more than getting shot in the neck to put

me down. Just need to stop the bleeding.” She produced a vial, pulling the stopper out with her teeth and spitting it out—at Starlight, no less. Then she tipped her head back, downing the contents. I saw the words “extra strength” beneath a Ministry of Peace logo. As soon as she finished the vial, she tossed it aside, where it clattered and skidded under a table. The gash across her cheek narrowed as the flesh within knitted together.

Starlight stared at her, mouth opening to say something, but she stopped herself. She shook her head, turning away.

We remained there for a couple minutes, clustered together in the dark corner of the ruined cafeteria. Other than the quiet clanking any time Sickie moved, it remained silent.

Finally, Dusty drew back. “Okay, we may be good. Let’s check these bodies for valuables and make sure they’re dead, then get back to searching for the server.”

We slunk back into the shadows, with Sickie lingering behind, having donned her helm once again. She was a fair bit more sluggish than before, but it didn’t seem to hamper her mood.

If anything, the carnage of the fight had improved it. She seemed quite happy as she flipped the dead stallion over, cutting the straps that held his battle saddle in place and prying away his weapon. “Anyone want a big dumb gun?” she asked, hefting it up. The thing was thick and stubby, with a huge barrel. The bore looked bigger than a shotgun’s, and it was fed from a giant drum. The name “Chomper” was painted on the side, with teeth painted on either side of the large port, as if the massive bolt itself were a jaw.

“What the hell is that?” Dusty asked, which impressed upon me just how unusual the weapon must have been.

“I don’t know, some shitty fucking homemade shotgun.” Sickie shrugged, tossing it aside. “Didn’t help this fucker much!”

She then raised her hoof and jammed her leg-blades into his neck, sawing back and forth as she sliced through the flesh. I turned away, feeling sickened. It didn’t spare me from the wet sounds of flesh tearing and spine separating.

“There,” she said, followed by another cough and a spit. “Ugh. There. Just need something to carry the heads in.”

Dusty sighed, shook his head, and walked off. He kept his gun up and ready. Starlight followed him.

"Why do you even want his head?" I asked, even as I realized I may not want to know.

"Cause I want the bounty on these raiders, dumbass."

"You only need the ear for that."

"Oh, sure," Sickle said, sneering. "Except Steel Shot's being a little bitch and whining that some of them are the wrong ear, so he isn't going to pay me for them. So fuck him, I'll just bring the whole damn head, and he can have both."

"Wouldn't it just be simpler, and *easier*, to just bring the correct ear?"

"Sure," she said, shrugging. "But I don't know which one he wants."

"He wants the right ear."

"I know *that*," she said, and something about her posture suggested she had just rolled her eyes. "I just don't know which one that is."

I had to stop and process that for a moment. The natural conclusion seemed absolutely ludicrous to me. "Do you mean to tell me you're going to decapitate more than a dozen ponies and haul their heads around, all because you can't tell your right hoof from your left?"

"Yeah," she said, a growl entering her voice. "What of it?"

I had to resist the urge to sigh and walk away. Instead, I raised a hoof and pointed to the crumpled table beside her. "Could you hit that table with one of your forehooves, as hard as you possibly can?"

The bloodied helm tilted to the side. "What the fuck for?"

"Just humor me, please."

She stared at me for a moment, then turned, reared up, and slammed her hoof into the table with a tremendous crash, flattening it against the ground.

When she looked back at me, no doubt glaring within her helmet, I nodded. "That's your right hoof." She looked down to her hoof, frowning, and I added, "Apparently, your right hoof is the right one for hitting things."

She considered that for a moment, then dropped Gut's head beside his body. She slowly placed her left forehoof on his armored chest, then raised her right hoof to press the blades into his torn belly, simply

holding them there for a moment. Then she slowly smiled, drawing back. “That might actually work,” she mused.

Then she looked back down to the severed head lying on the ground, facing up at her. She gripped the head with one hoof as she raised the other to his ear. His left ear.

She had just started to cut in when she stopped. Then she turned his head around to face the same way as her. “Right,” she said, and cut away the correct ear. She smiled as she lifted it away, looking absolutely pleased with herself. After tossing it into the armored box at her side, she turned back to the severed head. “Guess I don’t need your ugly mug any more.”

With that, she stepped back and gave it a solid kick, sending the head sailing across the room to smack meatily into the opposite wall. While I winced and looked away, trying to ignore the grotesque absurdity of the whole scene, she merely chuckled.

She walked by me, pausing to give me a very solid pat on the back with her bloody, spiked hoof. “Thanks, Whimper.”

“Don’t mention it,” I mumbled.



We finished our excursion in Equestrian Robotics without further incident.

While looting the dead seemed like a stark reminder of how things had changed with the megaspells, I didn’t find it especially troubling. Sickie’s gleeful attitude as she handled the bodies was more unnerving, especially the ones she had killed. She was proud of the carnage she had caused, and I heard her chuckling a few times as she looted the corpses of the ponies she had killed.

Myself, I tried to avoid paying them too much attention. I hadn’t had the time to get a good look at any of them during the frantic moments of the fight. I preferred to keep it that way.

But there was one that caught my attention. I almost wish she hadn’t.

I had made my way to the room Sickie had first charged into when I found her. The raider mare lay there, the crude metal plates of her barding shifting quietly with her short, labored breaths. Her side was

soaked with blood, flowing from the pair of deep gashes across her chest; Sickle's blades had torn right through the road signs and serving trays that made up her armor, leaving ribs bare.

A foreleg twitched, and I kept my rifle leveled at her chest. A submachine gun lay beside her hoof, loaded with a large drum. Her half-lidded eyes wavered, not quite looking at me. She was too weak to do anything.

I stared down at her: crippled, barely conscious, slowly bleeding to death.

I was hungry.

A quick glance out the door showed that everypony else was still gathered around the entrance of the cafeteria. Nopony would witness me.

I moved around behind the mare. Her eyes wandered roughly in my direction, and she made a weak, gurgling moan as her hoof shifted, brushing against her dropped weapon. I moved up behind her, placing a hoof on her neck, pressing just enough to keep her pinned there. Her moan grew choked, quiet and angry. Her hooves moved more, trying to clutch her weapon, but I swatted it away.

I loomed over her, reached deep inside her, and *pulled*.

Nothing.

I pulled harder as she choked and squirmed weakly beneath my hooves, and I finally felt a trickle of life-sustaining energy leaking out of her. I fed, drawing for all I was worth.

The raider mare writhed, her scream of rage and anguish choked into a weak gurgle by my hoof and her own injury.

The trickle of energy suddenly ceased, her limbs going still as she succumbed to her injuries. Her contorted expression slowly softened, and I staggered back, shaken.

I had gotten so little from her. A nibble, at best, and I had to dig deep for even that.

This wasn't a pony. She might look like it, but she was no more a pony than I was. Less, even. She was something else. Something wrong. ■

No pony could be so devoid of love.

With shaking hooves, I quickly grabbed what I could and left her.

Our looting turned up a good deal of crude barding, which we

all ignored, and a wide variety of weapons. Roughly half were melee weapons, which we also ignored. Most of the rest were pipe guns of various types: a couple pistols, some automatic rifles, and a single bolt-action long-rifle. None interested us. It did offer some replacement ammunition for my rifle, though, and several more magazines. I numbly picked those up, hoping to have Dusty check over them for quality when we were done there.

There were only a couple of more professionally made guns, with that raider mare's submachine gun being the most notable. It fired the same caliber of ammunition as my pistol, and the pair of drums I had grabbed explained how she had been able to lay out such a constant stream of fire. Sadly, she had fired almost all of her ammunition, but we collected that and the gun. I considered keeping one of the drums for my pistol, as ridiculous as it would probably be; it looked like the two weapons were designed to use the same magazines.

There was also a pistol, in rather poor shape, and a bolt-action rifle with a sawn-off barrel. Neither were likely to be worth that much, but we took them anyway.

We also found a fair number of pharmaceuticals, which Sickie claimed, and a total of four unused healing potions which we split evenly. A hoofful of caps and some questionable-looking and immediately discarded meat rounded out our findings.

I felt like a vulture, picking over the remains of the dead. As much as I tried to focus on my training, to remain clear-minded and unemotional, I still felt distinctly uncomfortable. It was a scenario well beyond any I had expected to find myself in just a couple weeks earlier. Though I tried to avoid focusing on it, the carnage was still shocking.

That was also the first time I saw what Starlight's Lancer could do to a pony.

She must have hit him in the head or neck. There was no trace of either, and most of his chest had been burnt away, severing one of his forelegs. A bit of spine and ribs had survived, scorched black by the heat. The flesh inside the gaping crater of a wound was charred to a crisp. Some parts still smouldered faintly, filling the air with the scent of burnt meat and hair.

The corpse lay near the others. Dusty and I had come up behind. Curiously, there were two dead raiders lying against the wall several yards away, one of which was absolutely riddled with bullet holes. Both had been dragged there some time before our arrival, judging by the trail of blood leading up to them.

Once our looting was complete, we crept through the dim hallways until we found the server room. Without the time pressure I had faced in Stable-Tec, it was a much calmer and easier process, and a few minutes later, a full copy of the server's contents resided on the supplied datastore.

As we exited the building to continue on, we saw another raider in front of the Stable-Tec building, lit by the light of the lobby. He was hobbling slowly away, back toward the buildings across the pond, and dragging one of his hind legs.

Dusty leveled his rifle, and after a couple seconds of aim, the deep crack of his shot echoed off the nearby buildings. The pony in the distance lurched to the side and fell to the ground. Then we were moving again.

Our path took us past the fallen raider. Once again, Dusty paused, putting a single round into his head before continuing on. Starlight looked sick to her stomach.

We found no more raiders. No more living ones, anyway; we went through the Stable-Tec building again to check on the security office, now that the keypad was powered, and swung by the server room to check on the raiders Dusty had fired on there. Two lay dead outside the server room, and another two lay among the ruined servers, killed when the mine had detonated. As had become the norm, we checked them over for loot, but the only thing of interest was a ridiculously short pump shotgun, with no stock and hardly any barrel. Dusty tucked it away, as well as a bandolier of shells.

Sadly, the security office was disappointing. Rather than the armory we had envisioned, it was instead merely a room for monitoring the security cameras around the building. Half of them were nonfunctional, their screens showing only static, and the ones that functioned showed nothing of interest. There were no racks of weapons, ammuni-

tion, and barding.

But there was the skeleton of a pony, clad in the tattered remains of a Stable-Tec Security uniform and lying crumpled in the one chair of the office. I wondered what circumstances had led to him dying there in a locked room, far from the balefire that had devastated Equestria.

Without opposition, the rest of our search went smoothly, even if it was still tense. We remained on-guard, worried that, at any moment, we'd run into some straggler, some raider who had avoided the earlier fighting. It never happened.

One by one, we cleared through the remaining buildings, finding their servers and pilfering their data. Our digital loot was the only prize to be found within those halls. The Ironshod Firearms office had been thoroughly stripped, leaving nothing of value; we even found places where heavy machinery had once been bolted to the floor, but those too had fallen prey to earlier scavengers. The Canterlot Medical Research Group and Crystal Life Technologies buildings were mostly research labs rather than practical medical facilities, and what little supplies they had held had been looted long ago, leaving only a few empty medical boxes and overturned carts.

Feeling shaken and filthy did lead to one course of looting that I likely wouldn't have considered otherwise, as I checked the soap dispensers in each restroom we went by. By the time we finished, I had a good dozen bottles of antibacterial soap. As odd as it might have been, it was a comforting touch of normality. Luxury, even.

The only remaining item that drew any interest, at least from myself, was a white, egg-shaped pod in the CLT offices. Even then, it was simply mild curiosity. I was not as interested in their suspended animation technology as I was in how my hive had made use of that. If that information was there, it would be within their servers.

It took about an hour to thoroughly scour the ancient buildings. As we stepped out of the last office, we cast our eyes toward the buildings across the pond. Most of the lights had gone out, but a few remained. After a moment of consideration, Dusty spoke up. "We should probably check those out. They might have some loot worth hauling back."

"Of course we should check it out," Sickie said, trudging along

behind us. "Dibs on the chems."

We slowly circled around the pond, moving carefully among the picnic tables. Our eyes remained locked on the lit windows of the buildings ahead, our weapons ready. I tried my best to mimic Dusty's gliding walk, keeping my rifle sighted in on the nearest building, but met with only limited success.

The closest building was the store, with the decaying pony hung from a pole like some profane raider flag. We cautiously circled around to approach from a side with few windows.

We shuffled quietly up to the wall, Dusty moved up to prepare to make entry, and Sickie simply ignored all of us to stroll in the front door.

When her entrance wasn't immediately answered with angry yells and gunfire, we followed her in.

The store had been turned into some grisly shrine to death. All the shelves had been knocked over and shoved into the back to make way for the giant heap of bones that had taken their place. There must have been hundreds of skeletons there.

I understood then why we hadn't found any bodies elsewhere within those old, dead offices. They had all been collected here.

More concerning, while I am by no means an expert in forensic science, some of those bones appeared to be quite fresh. A few still had bits of meat clinging to them, and the air was laced with a faint undercurrent of rot.

Behind the giant mound of bones, atop the piled up shelves, was a crude living space. A large mattress dominated the uneven platform, while a wide variety of melee weapons lined the back wall. A few dozen pony skulls were scattered around on either side of the platform, and a few ice chests were set along the back edge. A single electric lantern hung over the space, casting shadows around the room.

It seemed extravagantly grotesque, yet I found myself unsurprised. I had encountered too much carnage, suffering, and vileness in too short of a time; this seemed merely more of the same. I could even appreciate the logic of how such a display could be a sign of power and accomplishment among such monstrous creatures.

The chests contained a large amount of chems, which Sickie took,

and a large variety of snack cakes, which prompted a bit of a smile from Starlight, even if short lived. The bag of caps, probably about a pound, got tucked away in Dusty's bags; we agreed to work out the exact split of everything once we were well away from that place.

I did snag one thing that seemed to escape my companion's attention: a small, ragged notebook, well-used. A quick flip through the pages showed all manner of scribbled notes, with no coherent organization. I tucked it away for later consideration.

We looted the place quickly and moved on.

The windows of the restaurant were mostly boarded up, with only a faint, guttering light seeping through the gaps. We stepped in to see the meager remains of a cooking fire, struggling to light the space. The restaurant looked to have been converted to a dormitory, or perhaps a barracks. Many of the booths had been torn out, their benches cluttered with rough blankets and pillows. Boxes and chests of all sorts were scattered about.

The once-bright decor had long since faded, and the walls were covered with various forms of crude graffiti, most of which was pornographic, violent, or both.

The moment we stepped inside, I could hear a faint banging, echoing from the back of the restaurant. They were slow and irregular. Then, at the edge of my hearing, I caught a sob.

We followed the sound. What we found... troubles me.

In what had once been a walk-in freezer were two earth pony mares. One looked to be about Starlight's age, if that. The other was probably around fifteen or twenty years older. Both had silvery gray coats and dark manes. They were dirty and bruised, their cheeks matted with dried tears.

The older mare was locked in a small, thick-barred cage that offered barely enough room to lie down. The banging we had heard was her kicking at the inside of the lock. She froze in the middle of winding up for another kick. I remember the look of horror as we stepped into the room, and the way it had turned to fearful, wary interest as she realized we were not her captors.

The younger mare was bound atop a sawhorse, with one hoof tied

to each leg. A bit and bridle had been strapped onto her. Her tail had been cut down to a nub, and traces of dried blood and other substances stained the inside of her thighs.

"Oh, shit," Starlight uttered under her breath, her eyes wide.

From the cage, the older mare spoke up, her voice trembling and cautious, but I couldn't help but sense a bit of hope in there. "Who are you?"

Dusty was looking around, blinking. "We... we're here to help." He swallowed, then looked back. "Star, get that cage open."

Star nodded, quickly digging out her cutter to work on the cage's padlock. Dusty pulled out a knife, crouching down beside the younger mare to cut at the bindings around her hooves.

I stood back, feeling a bit useless.

Sickle stepped up, sticking her head through the doorway into the crowded room. The older mare jerked back in her cage with a gasp. I glanced back at Sickie, and it was only after a moment of consideration that I felt somewhat ashamed and uncomfortable that I did not share her reaction. Her armored, brutish head was slathered in dried blood, making her look every bit as vile as the raiders we had just killed. The same raiders that had held these two ponies captive.

Under the bloodstained muzzle of her helm, Sickie's lips curled up in a grin as she snorted in amusement. "Ah, fun. I see we found their rec room."

The padlock clattered to the ground behind me, and an instant later a dark-blue leg shot past me, a hoof striking Sickie in the face. Her helmeted head rocked to the side, though I think it was more from surprise than the force of the blow. It turned back, that sharp-horned, bloodstained, muzzled helm facing the pony that had just struck her.

Starlight seethed, glaring up at the monstrous mare. "Get! The fuck! *Out!*"

I looked between the two, eyes wide, and pulled the stock of my rifle in tight against my shoulder.

Sickle stared back at her, as if incredulous that this other pony had just struck her.

A slow, deep rumble built up within her, until her blood-flecked

lips pulled up in a savage grin. She laughed. Then she raised a hoof. Starlight raised her own hoof to fend it off, but it did her no good. Sickie shoved her; the gesture looked completely casual on Sickie's part, but it sent Starlight crashing back against the wall. Starlight staggered with the impact, her wounded leg wobbling, but she regained her footing. She stood firm, hooves spread, eyes narrowed.

Sickie laughed again, sneering down at the much smaller pony that stood against her. "Yeah, whatever you say, runt." Her head drew back from the doorway, armor clattering against ancient kitchen appliances as she turned around to leave. "And learn how to fucking hit."

The door of the cage clanged, and I looked back as the older mare scrambled over to the younger, practically falling onto her. "I'm here, baby," she cooed, wrapping the other pony in a tight embrace. "It's okay. It's over. We're safe now."

The younger pony trembled, choking back a sob as she shakily raised her freed forelegs to clutch onto the other mare. Still clutching her tight, the older mare brought her hooves up to undo the bridle's straps, sliding the assembly off and tossing it away.

The final binding parted under Dusty's knife. The younger mare whimpered as she slid to the side, eased to the ground by the older one. She trembled, curling up in the older mare's embrace, and finally broke down completely. Her whole body shook as she sobbed into the other mare's chest.

Dusty rose, leaning down near the older mare's head to whisper, "We'll wait out front."

The mare nodded, continuing to quietly murmur as she held the younger pony, rocking gently.

We shuffled out, leaving the two alone for the moment.

When we returned to the main room of the restaurant, we found Sickie sprawled out on her back across one of the empty booths, managing to occupy both benches at once. She was looking down at the wound she had received, right at the edge of her unarmored groin. The whole area was caked in dried blood. It seemed unfair to me; it looked to be about the same size of a wound as the one that had caused Starlight so much trouble, but Sickie seemed to regard the injury as a curiosity.

When we entered, Sickle looked up, leveling an unpleasant grin at Starlight before looking to Dusty. "Well, this was fun. We done here?"

"We're going to wait for them," he replied. "I'd like to talk with them before we head out, make sure they get home safe."

"Uh-huh," Sickle said, having already lost interest, and went back to prodding an armored hoof at her injury. "Let me know when you bitches are ready to get going."

Starlight huffed and walked off, muttering something about salvage. I immediately followed her.

As soon as we stepped out of the room, I moved up close to her. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she replied, jaw tense as she continued on.

"Starlight," I said, giving a pleading tone to my voice, and she hesitated mid-step. For a moment, her expression tightened. Then she sighed, her hoof lowering to the ground, her ears drooping.

"I'm tired, I've been shot, and my brain's all fuzzy on painkillers. I got to see Sickle gut that stallion because she thought it was *fun*, and Dusty straight-up executed a wounded pony. And then there's *that*," she said, gesturing in the rough direction the raiders had held their captives. "And if all that weren't enough, Sickle's determined to be as nasty as she possibly can. It's just annoying when she does it to us, but doing it in front of those two? After what they must have been through? That's just fucking *wrong*."

I nodded sympathetically.

"And I really want to kill her for it. I just want to take all that nasty shit she's been saying and doing and turn it all on her. I think I'd be *happy* about it, even. All 'ironic like', right?" She sighed, her head slumping. "And that scares me. Like... is that how raiders get started? Is that how *she* started?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe. But you're not like that."

"No, I'm not," she replied, giving a quiet snort. "I just helped kill, what, fifteen? Twenty ponies? I'm not even bothered that I did. They're *raiders*. They *need* to be put down. But I helped Sickle do all that nasty shit she did. And now I'm scared she's going to keep doing that nasty shit to some ponies that have already gone through so much,

and I don't know what I might do if she does."

"I was scared, too," I said. "When you hit Sickie, I thought she was going to be pissed. I was scared she was going to try to kill you right in front of me, and that there wasn't anything I could do about it. But instead... she backed down and did what you told her to do."

Starlight blinked at me, then looked back the way we had come.

"And I was scared when you were shot. For a second, I thought you were going to die, and then there was all the blood." I shuddered, shaking my head.

She looked back at me, a flash of worry crossing her expression before offering a weak smile; I could feel the sense of affection grow stronger as her attention turned to me. "Hey, don't worry. It's going to take a lot more than a bullet in the leg to stop me."

Her expression held for about a second before suddenly falling flat. "Aw, shit. I just copied Sickie, didn't I?"

I gave a weak, momentary smile. "Maybe a little."

Starlight threw back her head, groaning loudly. "Fuuuuck."

Dusty called out from the front of the restaurant. "What?"

"Nothing!" Starlight quickly replied. I'm pretty sure I heard Sickie snickering.

As Starlight huffed out a grumbling sigh, I reached out a hoof to lightly nudge her, and when I got her attention again, offered a soft smile. "Don't worry too much about it," I said, trying to sound gentle but confident. "You know you're a good pony. You're trying to protect ponies. That's good. That's why we're here, right?"

She wavered, looking away. "...No. We just came here for money."

"And if it were anypony other than raiders here, we wouldn't have come," I said, and met her eyes as she looked back to me. "We were willing to accept the job because, if it came down to a fight, we'd be fighting raiders that prey on other ponies. We made the Wasteland a little safer, today. And you know, even if I'd hoped to do this sneakily, without them ever knowing we were here..." I tilted my head, gesturing in the direction of the kitchen and the freezer beyond. "...I'm glad it turned out the way it did."

She glanced that way, and sighed. "Yeah, I guess so."

I reached up again, and this time she leaned in, wrapping her hooves around me as we hugged.

As her foreleg pressed against my left shoulder, I winced.

She quickly released her grip, looking alarmed. "You okay?" she asked, and followed my gaze to my own shoulder. "Oh, shit. You're hurt!"

It looked like my coat was roughed up in a tiny patch, with bits of dried blood crusted into the hairs. Starlight brushed at it with a hoof, making me wince as she pushed back the hairs to look at the wound itself, and in the process, blocked my own view. "Shit, why didn't you say anything, Whisper?"

"It didn't hurt until somepony started jabbing their hoof in it!" I said, gritting my teeth as she prodded at my shoulder.

"It's not a bullet wound," she said, giving another press that made me hiss through my teeth. "Something stuck you, though, and it feels like there's still something just under your skin. We should get this cleaned out."

She quickly led me back to the main room of the restaurant, and right into an *interesting* conversation.

Sickle was still kicked back, but her helm's muzzle hung freely, revealing her leering grin, an expression made even more disturbing by the dried blood matting her coat and the long, partially healed gash across her cheek. "Ah, it'd be just like good old times. Well, would have been even better an hour ago. Post-fight fucking is the best fucking." She snickered, taking a deep swig from a bottle.

Dusty, meanwhile, had been glaring out the window, as if to ignore her. He noticed our arrival, wincing a little before replying to her. "There were no 'old times', Sickie. It was once. And I wouldn't call it good, either."

Sickle snorted and coughed, lowering her bottle as she started to laugh. "Hah! Damn, Dirt, that almost hurts! Also, that's brahminshit. I remember you getting *really* into it."

Starlight was looking back and forth between them, and finally leveled a flat, disapproving look at Dusty. "Seriously? You slept with *that*?"

Dusty scowled, continuing to look away from everypony. "I'd been stuck putting up with her shit all day, so I got drunk as hell that night."

I don't remember anything after that. I just remember waking up with her lying on top of me."

Sickle waved her bottle toward him. "Well shit, if all you need is some booze, I've got a few more in here. Want one?"

"No," Dusty grumbled. "And can we not talk about this right now, with those two right in the next room?"

Sickle snickered and turned to us. "So, you two done fucking, already?"

Starlight leveled an unamused glare her way. "We weren't having sex," she said before turning away, seeming intent on ignoring Sickle as she pulled out her medical supplies.

As she started to clean my wound, Sickle snickered. "Oh! Star likes to play rough, does she?"

Through grit teeth, Starlight replied, "We weren't playing at all."

"We were talking," I said, hoping to help, but it didn't seem to dissuade Sickle at all.

"Yeah, sure. Two marefriends slip off in—"

"We're not marefriends!" Starlight snapped, glaring at Sickle again. "Why the fuck does everypony think I'm a lesbian?"

"I don't think you're a lesbian," Sickle said. "I bet you like getting cock just as much."

"Oh for fuck's sake," Starlight grumbled, turning back to my shoulder. After a moment, she added, "And just for reference, if you start talking about anything even remotely like this around either of those mares, I'm going to shoot you."

"Yeah, sure thing, runt."

Starlight flinched as Sickle reached out, only to stare in confusion at the bottle the huge mare was holding out. After a moment of silence, Sickle gave the bottle a little wiggle, to which Starlight hesitantly replied. "No thank you..."

"Suit yourself," Sickle said, bringing the bottle back to her lips and downing the rest of the contents. The spent bottle ended up tossed back, clattering off a couple empty booths before hitting the ground and rolling to a stop.

Starlight continued to stare incredulously at Sickle, only to finally

shake her head and return her attention to my injury.

The distraction had given me a better opportunity to look it over, myself. It was just a shallow cut, not even an inch long, but a gentle touch along the back edge of the cut had returned a sharp stab of pain.

After a few prods of her own, and accompanying wincing of pain, the forceps came out again. I braced myself, but to my surprise, it wasn't as painful as I expected. It still hurt, of course, but mostly, it just felt weird. I don't know if I'll ever get truly used to wearing a fleshy form. Feeling my outsides stretching and wiggling around can be nauseating if I focus on it too much.

In this particular case, however, I had to admit some advantage to it. Sure, my carapace might have protected me from the injury, but if it had failed to completely protect, it would have made the effort to extract the foreign object lodged inside me much more difficult. At least the flesh stretched to allow the object passage instead of trapping it in place.

I suppose there are *some* advantages to being a pony.

It took Starlight only a few moments, with only a mild jab of pain, and the forceps floated before me, clasped around a curved, jagged shard of metal.

"Bullet fragment," Starlight said, dropping the piece into my hoof. It was so tiny.

She dribbled some liquid from one of her bottles over the cut, making me wince once more, and wrapped a non-magical bandage around my shoulder to keep it clean. I'm not even sure if it was necessary at that point; it was already feeling better.

It probably helped that I got a fair bit of affection from Starlight, finally taking a bit of the edge off my hunger.

With that, it was down to waiting. After a couple minutes, Starlight and I set out again to search the place, though we stayed away from the open freezer to leave the two mares some privacy. It wasn't a terribly big place, and our search soon turned up their stockpile: a huge assortment of two-century-old food, all packaged up safely in cans and boxes, as well as several fuel-cans of water. It took us several trips to ferry all of it back to the main room, leaving us with a pile of food that probably

weighed twice as much as I did. To the raiders, it probably represented a couple weeks worth of food. To our small group, it might last a couple months.

We started rooting through the various chests and boxes the raiders had kept their own belongings in. There were all sorts of things in them: a few crude melee weapons and pipe guns, spare ammo, loose caps, knick-knacks ranging from cards and pornography to bones and body parts, and a fair collection of drugs that Sickie promptly claimed. We even turned up a single super restoration potion, which ended up tucked into Starlight's supplies.

What we were really looking for, however, were the various sacks, bags, and packs they had tucked away. Once we'd dug out enough bags, we started loading the food and loot into them.

We were almost done with that when Dusty, who was keeping a lookout, brought up his binoculars to peer at something that had caught his attention. I hardly even noticed, just some action on the periphery of my vision, of no particular importance.

What I did notice was him suddenly ducking down below the window, eyes wide as he stared off into space at the blank wall. "Oh shit."

Naturally, that caught the attention of all of us. "What?" Starlight asked, being the quickest to voice the question that rose to all of our minds.

"Oh shit," Dusty repeated. "We need to go."

The last of Starlight's cans lifted up in the glow of her magic to be dumped unceremoniously into a bag before hurrying over to Dusty. "What is it?" she said, drawing his attention barely in time for him to reach up and stop her from getting to the window.

"Stay down!" he hissed. "Don't let it see you!"

"What is 'it'?"

"There's a fucking alicorn out there."

"What?" Starlight asked, then shook free of his grip to slide up to the window, levitating her Lancer.

"Don't shoot at it! You'll just piss it off and tell it where we are!"

"I'm not going to shoot it," Starlight said. "I just want to get a look at it."

After a momentary pause, she asked, "Where is it?"

Dusty grunted out a short grumble, peeking up just enough to look out again before ducking down. "That little glow way out there, in the saddle."

Starlight blinked and looked down at him. "Saddle?"

"The... the lower ridge between the two hilltops! It's skylined there."

"Oh," Starlight said, turning back and aiming her Lancer that way. Having finished cramming the last of my own supply of cans into the waiting bags, I moved up to peer over her shoulder. The hills were probably a quarter mile away, and I could only just make out a faint purple light. Starlight hummed softly before speaking. "I wonder if that's the same alicorn we ran into before?"

"You two ran into—" Dusty cut himself off, his hoof returning to rub at the bridge of his nose as he sighed. "Of *course* you ran into an alicorn. You two are fucking cursed or something."

Starlight floated up the Lancer so I could look down the sight. I had to nudge it a bit to get it onto the correct point on the horizon again, but soon found what I was looking for.

She stood still on the ridgeline, faintly illuminated by the purple glow of her horn. The alicorn looked almost like a ghost, her coat barely standing out from the darkness around her. Her wings were spread beside her, her tail and mane slowly drifting in the still air.

I couldn't tell if she was the same being we had encountered before, only that she had a similar coloration.

When I slid back, Dusty lowered his hoof. "You two done sightseeing, yet?"

"Yeah," Starlight said, sliding back. "I'm done."

"Good." He moved over to one of the empty booths, grabbing at the bedding there. "Sickle, grab as many of those food bags as you can carry."

"I ain't your fucking pack mule," she replied, though she rolled onto her hooves and lazily grabbed some bags as she said it.

"Whisper, go get those two mares. Get them up and moving, we need to get out of here."

"On it," I replied, and turned to head their way.

While I was confident in my abilities, it was not a conversation I was looking forward to. To tell the truth, I'd rather not be in that situation at all. But, I was there, and probably the best suited to get the job done, so I headed back to the walk-in freezer.

They were still sitting where we had left them, but now they sat there silently. The younger one was no longer crying, though she shook faintly with her long, deep breaths. The older one remained silent, slowly rocking, her forelegs wrapped protectively around the younger.

I hesitated only a moment before slowly approaching. The older mare twitched when she heard me, looking my way, and I did my best to put on a gentle, sympathetic expression. "I'm sorry, I don't want to rush you, but we can't stay here any longer. We need to go."

She continued to look at me for a couple seconds with a look of mixed fear and determination. She finally swallowed, her voice slightly hoarse as she asked, "How soon?"

I gave a soft sigh, as if to show reluctance. "Now."

Her ears drooped a bit, but she nodded, and turned back to the other mare. I stepped back to the door to wait.

"Honey?" she quietly murmured. "We need to go."

She was met with a soft whimper, and leaned in to whisper quietly. After a few moments, the whimper stopped. The younger mare looked up, wavering a moment before a hint of the older mare's determination was echoed in her expression, and she nodded.

"Let's get you up, then. Easy, there." Slowly, and with a good deal of help, the younger mare rose on shaky hooves. Her jaw was tight and breath shaky as she took her first step. She nearly fell, leaning heavily against the other mare for balance as her legs wobbled. Despite that, she forced herself onward.

"You're doing fine," the older mare cooed. She smiled, even as fresh tears started to roll down her cheek. "We're getting out of here."

Watching the poor mare's slow and painful progress, I had to speak up. "We have a few spare healing potions, if you'd like a couple."

The older mare blinked against the tears, and the look she gave me was full of caution. "...How much?"

I remember that one line more than anything else. After all the

violence, all the carnage, all the vileness I had witnessed and learned of, I think that moment of simple, perfunctory cynicism hit the hardest. My eyes widened on hearing it, ears perking up. I stammered, entirely without intent. "N-no. For free. I couldn't..."

She considered me for a moment before relaxing slightly, nodding. "Sorry. I'm just a little... wary of ponies, right now."

"I understand," I said, then opened my pack to produce the healing potion I had just recently acquired. She took it, giving a quiet murmur of thanks before turning to the pony resting against her.

"Here, baby," she said, removing the stopper and offering the bottle to the other mare. "Drink this. You'll feel better."

She did, and after a few moments, was ready to move again. By the time we reached the main room of the restaurant, her pace was more sure, less laborious, though her head still hung low.

Sickle was heaving the last large bag of food onto her back as we returned. Both mares faltered upon seeing her. Fortunately, Dusty approached, a couple new bundles strapped to his back. "I'm very sorry for having to rush you like this, ma'am, but we need to hurry out of here while we still can. My name's Dusty Trails. What can I call you two?"

While Starlight quirked an eyebrow questioningly at me and silently mouthed Dusty's full name, the older mare answered. "Silverline. And this is my daughter, Quicksilver."

"Glad to meet you," Dusty said. "The rest of the meet-and-greet will have to wait, I'm afraid. We've got something dangerous coming in, and I'd like to get out of here before it arrives. Are you good to move?"

Silverline swallowed, but nodded. "We are."

"Good. Stay close, and we'll get out of here. If there's anything you need, if you need help with anything, just speak up and somepony will take care of it. Everypony else, don't be afraid to ditch those bags if we have to move quickly; our lives are worth more than a few days of food. Now let's go."

We moved to the back door of the building, slipping out where the other buildings would mask our movement. Silverline kept glancing over at us. We'd crept by three houses before she quietly spoke up.

“One of the raiders. A big one, white, with a big gun on—”

“He’s dead,” Sickie rumbled, her helm turning as she looked down at the smaller mare. She paused mid-step to lift a foreleg, brandishing the pair of bloodstained blades mounted there. “Gutted him myself.”

Silverline stared at Sickie for a long moment before giving a nod. She seemed satisfied with the answer, and continued on without any more sideways glances.

Our progress was slow, and not terribly quiet. The clinking and scraping of Sickie’s armor was matched by the collection of cans we carried, but slowly and surely, we made our way toward the wall of the compound, and the gate leading out, with its vague promise of uncertain safety.

Dusty covered from the edge of a house as we moved up, waiting until Starlight and I had gotten the gate open and had set ourselves in position to cover him before hurrying after us.

He was almost to the gate when the alicorn glided in over the pond. My heart lurched as Starlight and I both tracked this unknown threat. Fortunately, for whatever reason, she didn’t look our way, and Dusty scrambled behind me for cover.

We stayed very still, not daring to move any more than was required to keep the alicorn in our sights. She back-winged once, her hooves gracefully touching down to the ground as she transitioned into a walk. She moved slowly, with a casual confidence. From that distance, in that poor lighting, I couldn’t make out her expression, but her posture and movement gave the impression of a haughty disdain for the world around her.

It made me think of the most prideful of nobility or Queens.

More concerningly, Starlight’s stories and Dusty’s fearful reaction made me worry that such a display of casual superiority might not be unfounded.

She came to a halt beside the body of a raider, the last one Dusty had shot in front of the Stable-Tec offices. Her horn lit, and a soft purple glow wrapped around the body, lifting it up to eye level as she peered down her snout at it. She slowly turned it over, looking at the bloody corpse. Then her magic twisted around it, and the dead raider’s

torso tore open.

After all I'd seen that day, the gory display no longer drew the sense of revulsion it might have before. Despite that, I found myself very concerned about the motivation behind the alicorn's actions, and very afraid of what might happen if she got her hooves on us. I stayed perfectly still, barely breathing despite the heartbeat hammering in my ears.

Organs pulled away, floating before the alicorn in a grotesque swarm of flesh. A leg tore open, as if the muscles burst within it, and then the head twisted until the skull cracked and split. A faint trace of revulsion started to rise in my gut. I'm thankful that I was far enough away to not hear the sounds that must have accompanied such a gruesome display.

The alicorn regarded her work impassively, occasionally floating a part closer for better inspection. One by one, parts were replaced within the cavities they had been removed from. Once they were all back in place, the wounds closed, knitting together in what struck me as an impressive display of magic. The torso closed up, the torn-open head sealed itself, and before long, the only sign of the raider's injuries was the copious amount of blood staining his coat.

The alicorn's magic turned and posed the raider's corpse, slowly lowering it until the hooves touched the ground. Supported in her magic, it looked like the raider was simply standing there, as if Dusty had never shot him.

Then her magic winked out, and the corpse collapsed, limp and lifeless.

She stared down her snout at it for a second before looking away, toward the Equestrian Robotics offices. She resumed her slow, confident walk, stepping over the corpse as if it was once again beneath her notice.

As the alicorn walked further away, Starlight slid up beside me. "Can we go now?"

I nodded, and we crept back from the open gate. As we got further away, we picked up the pace, determined to put as much distance between us and that place as we could.

I silently followed along as we slipped away into the darkness, hop-

ing I would never see Paradise Beach again.

Chapter Ten

How to Talk to Ponies

The trek to our planned camp was slow and quiet. After the thundering adrenaline of combat, the tension of searching through ancient compounds, and the troubling horrors we had encountered, I was feeling wiped out. The lack of sleep simply made it all worse.

The others I was traveling with fared no better. Dusty was perhaps the most unaffected, but I could tell it was wearing on him. Even Sickie trudged along behind us, her head held lower than usual. I'm not sure if her lethargy was due to a lack of sleep, the after-effects of the multiple drugs she had taken, or simply her injuries affecting her more than she let on.

And then there were the two newcomers. The younger mare, Quicksilver, limped along with her head low, ears flattened. If she still had her tail, I imagine it would have been tucked between her legs. It was a pitiful sight, one that hurt to watch. Even as her limping worsened and she had to lean against her mother, she kept going. The only sound either of them made was when Silverline leaned in to quietly murmur to her.

When we had been waiting for night to fall, so we could infiltrate Paradise Beach in the dark, Dusty had scouted out a place for us to camp. It was a narrow draw along the slope of a low hill, lined with dry brush that offered the small site some measure of concealment. We were all quite relieved to return there, shedding our saddlebags and bundles of loot.

Dusty turned to the two mares, pulling the two extra bundles from his back. "Here, these are for you. I tried to find you the best I could, but I'm afraid we didn't have much selection."

Silverline looked to the two bundles, slowly nodding. "Thank you."

"Seems like the least I could do, with them being there and all," Dusty replied, giving an awkward smile that quickly slid away. "Anyways, uh, we'll try to give you two some privacy."

She hung back a short distance away as Dusty walked back to us,

speaking up. "It's about four hours until dawn," he said, "so we won't be staying long. We'll get some rest, but I want to be heading out at first light, just in case there are any more raiders out there that might come looking."

Sickle snorted as she pulled off her helmet, letting it drop to the ground with a heavy thump. "Really? 'Cause I've got like twenty fucking ears in my cans. I don't even know how Gutfuck got *that* many dumbasses following him, and you think he's got even more?"

Starlight groaned quietly. "Oh, wonderful. You managed to make his name even worse."

"What I think is that we don't know how many he had," Dusty replied. "So until we're back behind Rust's walls, we're going to keep an eye out for trouble."

"Yeah, sure," Sickle grumbled, removing her spiked hoof-boots.

Out of curiosity, and with my reluctance to speak with her eroded due to fatigue diminishing my common sense, I asked her, "Was this an unusually large group of raiders?"

"Unusual?" she echoed with an irritated snort. "Fuck yes, it is. I don't know how Gutfuck managed it, but he got the second biggest band of raiders I've ever seen."

"Only the second?"

"Yeah. First biggest was the crew I used to roll with." A short distance from the rest of us, Silverline's ears perked up, swiveling our way. "At least, they were," Sickle continued, "before I killed every single one of them."

After a couple seconds of silence, Starlight quietly spoke up. "Do you make a habit of killing the ponies you work with?"

Sickle shot her a glare, snarling. "Go fuck yourself, you mouthy cunt. And no. I make a habit of killing raiders."

She turned away, continuing to unbuckle armor, while Starlight rolled her eyes and pulled out her blanket.

With that sidetrack out of the way, Dusty spoke up again. "So anyway, I'll take watch for half our stop, but I'll need a volunteer for the other half."

"Fuck that shit," Sickle said.

Considering our options, I reluctantly volunteered to take first watch. I was accustomed to getting fairly little sleep and staying up far too late. Admittedly, that was under much better conditions, where I had a healthy supply of love to keep myself in top condition. Despite my current state, I hoped that experience would help me, as I seemed to be the best option remaining. I figured Starlight could use the rest more, given her injury; besides, her health was my health, at the moment.

Much to everyone's relief, Sickie removed her armor and spent some time with a rag and a bottle of murky water to crudely clean it, as well as getting most of the dried blood out of her coat. I think she might have looked even more horrific out of her armor. Aside from her snout, her neck was completely covered, as was the inside of one of her thighs. Her cleaning was far from complete, but at least when she was done it looked more like "slightly dirty" rather than "horror story slasher".

My standards continued to slip in unpleasant ways.

The wound in her neck was a small but jagged cut, and removing the armor seemed to have opened it up again, sending a slow trickle of fresh blood down her neck. Sickie eventually fished out another healing potion, which brought the bleeding to a halt. It also produced a questioning look from Starlight.

"Uh, you never got the bullet out, did you?" Starlight asked.

"Yeah, so?" Sickie said, tossing aside the bottle and returning to work on her armor. "Wouldn't be the first time. Probably got a dozen of them rattling around in me."

"Doesn't that hurt?"

Sickie snorted. "Maybe if I was a little bitch about it."

Starlight glared at her for several seconds before speaking again. "You enjoy being unpleasant, don't you?"

While Sickie didn't answer, she grinned as she continued cleaning her armor.

"That would be a 'yes'," Dusty helpfully informed us, which drew a scowl from Starlight.

"I can see how the two of you hooked up, before," she grumbled. "You're both colossal asses when you want to be."

Dusty shot her a scowl. "Hey, I'm not *that* bad."

"Yes he is," Sickle said, still grinning.

Starlight was silent for several seconds before turning to Dusty. "What was up with shooting that pony?"

Dusty blinked. "Uh, might need to be a bit more specific. We kinda shot a lot of ponies today."

"The one in front of Stable-Tec," Starlight said. "I mean, yeah, he was a raider—hell, I'm glad he's dead!—but just straight-up executing an unarmed and wounded pony? That doesn't seem right."

For a moment, Dusty simply sat there, frowning. Then he slowly shook his head. "If it were any other kind of pony, I'd agree with you a hundred percent. But a raider? A pony like that's got to be put down. You've seen what they do. You leave them alive, you're letting them do their horrible shit to more ponies down the road. Besides, it's better to make sure they don't get back up and come after you when you think you're safe."

"He's right about that," Sickle said with a chuckle. "First pony I ever killed thought I wasn't a threat any more." She turned back to cleaning her armor, and quietly muttered, "Had fun castrating the bastard, too."

"I dunno," Starlight said, shaking her head. "It just... I don't know..."

After a moment of consideration, Dusty spoke again "If it's any consolation, he was dead either way. Even if he didn't die from his injuries, we couldn't just leave him free to keep on doing his raider thing. We'd have to take him prisoner, and that means hauling him all the way back to Rust with us, and you know what they'd do with him. I just saved them some rope."

When Starlight didn't object, Dusty turned to one of the bags of food. "Let's get something to eat and hit the hay. Tomorrow's going to be a long day of walking."

He retrieved a few cans, produced a small folding knife with a can opener, and passed the opened cans around. While most of the cans were labeled as beans, I ended up with an unlabeled can of ravioli. They tasted like old tomatoes and grease, and had a gelatinous consistency. I'm not sure what the contents of the pasta were. It was probably some form of cheese, or at least some substance which had once passed for

cheese. With our lack of utensils, I had to resort to slurping the contents straight from the can.

Another mystery can had turned out to be peaches. Dusty gave that and a can of beans to Silverline and Quicksilver, as well as a bottle of water. Silverline accepted them, murmuring a quiet thanks.

They seemed so withdrawn and morose. Quicksilver in particular seemed almost robotic as she ate. Given what they had been through, I wasn't surprised. I wasn't a professional psychologist—at least, not in that sense—but I knew all about how actions and events could affect the emotions and mentality of a pony. Those two had been through some of the worst that the Wasteland had to offer.

That eventually led my thoughts back to Emerald, and her idea of how to fight back against the Wasteland itself: Kindness and Generosity.

I set my can down, wiped my mouth off, and turned to root around in my bags. It didn't take long to find what I was looking for.

Silverline looked up with an expression of caution as I stepped up to her. Behind her, Quicksilver focused very intently on the can she held in her hooves.

"Here," I said around the edge of the packages as I held out a pair of snack cakes, among the last that I had acquired in Rust. "I thought you might like some dessert."

She hesitated for a moment, looking at me and my weak smile, before carefully reaching out to take them. "Thank you," she said, and I think I saw a hint of a smile, if only for a moment. I simply nodded and headed back to my own meal.

As soon as everyone had eaten, things wound down. Dusty took the time to give his rifle a quick cleaning, which made me realize I had nothing to maintain my own weapon; I'd have to fix that at some point. Sickie eventually finished cleaning her armor, as well as dislodging the fragments of a bullet that had wedged themselves between the plates of her neck armor. She grinned with satisfaction as she looked over the pieces. They had struck right in the seam where two plates overlapped, and most of the fragments had stuck between one of the plates and the mesh behind it. The wound in her neck had likely come from a fragment of that bullet. I'm not sure why that amused her.

Soon everypony settled down to sleep, though not before Sickle had re-donned her armor and popped yet another pill. I was the exception, sitting back a little ways to keep an eye out, my rifle hanging against my chest. I tried to occupy my time by slowly loading some of the new-found ammunition into the extra magazines. It didn't take long, and a few minutes later I had five spare magazines resting in my ammo pouch. While I was uncertain of the quality of ammunition the raiders had carried, at least they had plenty of it. It seemed strange to have ended a fight with more ammo than I had started it with, especially when my method of firing had been to simply empty the magazine in the general direction of my enemy.

I missed the time when my "enemies" were dealt with primarily through words.

With nothing else to do, I settled in to wait through my two-hour watch. Apart from the occasional whimper from Quicksilver and the answering murmurs from Silverline, the night was almost perfectly silent. Only the faintest buzz lingered in my ears, a final reminder of that night's fighting.

It was probably half an hour later that Silverline rose, whispering a few gentle words to her daughter before carefully and quietly walking my way. I met her with a tiny, gentle smile.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," she whispered, barely audible with the way she hung back from me. "My daughter is having a lot of trouble sleeping, and... and I was wondering if you might have something that could help her."

My smile wilted in sympathy, but after a moment of thought, I forced it back. "I might be able to find something."

I got up, quietly approaching the slumbering form of Starlight. I whispered her name, but received no reply. After a few seconds of contemplation, I leaned down to nudge open her bags, pulling out the medical supplies.

Starlight murmured, "Huh?" as her eyes cracked open a tiny bit to look at me, and I just smiled back.

"I just needed to get a painkiller. Go back to sleep."

Her eyes closed, murmuring something indistinct. A few moments

later I found the bottle I was looking for. I opened it, retrieving a single pill before closing the bottle again and returning the medical supplies to Starlight's bags. Then I slipped away again, returning to Silverline.

"Here you go," I whispered as I offered her the pill. "It's a strong painkiller. I had to use one, once. It put me right out. I don't think I even dreamed that night."

She swallowed as she gingerly took the pill in one hoof. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice growing thick, and in the dim light, I was fairly sure I saw her blinking back tears. She quickly turned away, hobbling on three legs as she made her way back to her daughter. There were a few more whispers, and some shuffling as Silverline fetched the bottle of water. Soon they settled down again. This time, they were still.

The rest of my watch passed in silence.



I slept like a rock once Dusty relieved me.

That surprised me. When I had lain down, anxiety had been gnawing at my gut. In just a few short hours, I had seen such extreme violence, witnessed the aftermath of atrocities, and nearly died. While Silverline and Quicksilver had my sympathies, it was the last one that weighed heaviest on my mind. My hive may well be depending on me, and if I died, I would have failed them all.

So I took it as a sign of just how exhausting and draining the previous week or so had been that I remember nothing after pulling the blanket over my shoulders.

Starlight told me afterwards that she prodded me for almost a full minute before my eyes finally opened to the dim predawn light. The first few minutes of morning went by in an indistinct blur. Mostly, I just remember feeling miserable. I think I felt more tired than I had before going to sleep.

Breakfast was quick, as Starlight and I shared a quick meal of a few vegetables and a can of baked beans. Then we were packing to go.

Quicksilver looked as tired as I did, struggling to keep her eyes open as she sat there, while her mother bundled up their bedding. As soon as she finished, Silverline whispered a few words to her daughter before

walking up to us. There was a fresh sense of determination to her; she still looked cautious, but not cowed. "I wanted to thank you for... for what you did."

Dusty gave a half smile. "I'm glad we could help, ma'am."

Both Starlight and I echoed the sentiment. Sickie just took another sip from a dark bottle, making some weak rumble; while it was hard to tell under the helmet, even with the steel muzzle dangling free at the side, I got the impression she was as tired as I was.

"And I'm glad you did," Silverline said, nodding shakily. "We had nearly given up hope that anypony was coming for us. That anyone even cared."

Dusty's ears drooped, and he glanced our way before speaking again. "I'm sorry to say it, but we had no idea you were there. We were in the area for a job. We just happened to come across you. Damn glad we did, too."

It struck me as harsh, as if he were dashing her hopes that somepony had been looking out for them. I probably would have omitted that detail, myself. Still, she was bound to discover the truth eventually.

"Oh," she said, ears drooping a bit. "Th-then thank the goddesses you found us." She swallowed, her determination wavering for a moment. Then she took a deep breath, finding her resolve once more. "Thank you for what you've done, but I have to get my daughter home. I can't offer you anything now, but if you ever make your way to Mareford, I'll do anything I can to repay you for saving us."

"Hold on, there," Dusty said, his ears perking up. "That's not necessary. But, did you say Mareford? That's quite a ways away. How'd you two end up here?"

She hesitated to answer, but only for a moment. "We were with the water caravan, coming back from Rust."

"What?" Dusty's eyes widened. "They hit the water caravan? What about the Militia guards?"

I was surprised by the sharp edge to Silverline's voice. "There weren't any. Gun's been hiring mercenaries to guard the caravans for almost a year, now, and they took off half an hour before the raiders showed up."

Dusty's jaw dropped, followed by sputtering. "He... they... what?"

The information troubled me, as well. It didn't take a very cynical mind to draw a connection between the two events, and I turned to dig through my bags, seeking out the most immediate potential source of information: Gutrip's notebook.

I flipped through it until the writing stopped, then slowly made my way backwards, scanning over the randomly scribbled notes and pornographic doodles in hopes of finding anything that stood out.

I found what I was looking for almost immediately. Every head turned to me as I read one note, scrawled along the side of the last page of writing. "Water caravan, Rust to Mareford, three days, Rotwater bridge, no guards. The last bit's underlined."

Dusty broke the following silence. "Son of a bitch."

"Well that fucking explains it," Sickle rumbled. "No wonder that dumbass was doing so well. Gutfuck got himself a patron."

"Shit," Starlight murmured. "Someone's hiring raiders?"

"Naw," Sickle said with a sneer. "I'm sure those mercs just fucked off for the fun of it, and Gut was a fucking psychic."

Starlight rolled her eyes, grumbling under her breath.

"What the hell is Big Gun thinking?" Dusty said, scowling. "The Militia is supposed to take care of stuff like this. And for that matter, why the hell does he have any say in it? Hardwood's the one in charge of that stuff!"

"Hardwood stepped down last year," Silverline said. "Gun's in charge of Mareford, now."

Dusty blinked, evidently surprised again. "I know Big Gun's wanted to be mayor for years, but how in the hay did that happen?"

"I don't know," Silverline replied. "Politics was more my—" She cut herself off, trembling for a moment before speaking again. "It doesn't matter right now. I need to go and get my daughter home. Thank you for—"

"Now hold on there," Dusty said, raising a hoof. "Mareford's a long hike, and I'm not going to leave a pair of unarmed ponies to do it alone. We—" He stopped, mouth shutting as he looked back at us, and continued. "Well, I can't speak for anypony else, but I intend to make

sure you get there safe. I'll go with you."

"Us too!" Starlight quickly added, before looking to me. "I mean, if that's okay with you?"

"Absolutely," I said, giving a decisive nod.

Sickle dissented. "Fuck that." She swept her hoof around, gesturing to all of us. "We're all going to Rust," she said, before pointing a hoof at Dusty, "so that you can pay me what you fucking owe me."

"Relax," he said, scowling. "We'll be going by Rust. It's on the way. You'll get paid, and we can all be on our way."

"Right," Sickle said, sitting back. "Good."

Dusty slowly nodded, then looked back to Starlight. "Long as that's all okay with you, that is."

Silverline swallowed as she nodded, her eyes glistening as she blinked. "Th-thank you."

"No need to thank us," Dusty said, offering a smile. "I'm just doing what's right." The smile faded quickly. "Besides, I'd like to talk to Big Gun and find out what the hell he thinks he's doing, leaving ponies high and dry like that."

Even with her eyes tearing up, that sharpness returned to Silverline's expression. "Me too."



That first day was almost entirely uneventful. There was fairly little talking, and the scenery hadn't been that pretty even before the apocalypse. We stopped for lunch, breaking out another can each. Dusty even offered Silverline and Quicksilver some of his cigarettes, though they declined. While we ate and rested, I pored through the contents of the data-store.

It tried to resist me.

The moment I tried to pull up a file, my portable terminal beeped and froze. I flipped a switch, changing modes to peer at the crude spell matrix built into the data-store and the malicious bit of code it had tried to execute. It was small, but effective; if I had been using a regular terminal, the resulting spell would have caused its spell matrix to implode. Restarting it would have required a rather lengthy and

difficult process, made all the more difficult for not having the proper tools on me.

Instead, I smiled, stabbed a button with my hoof, and killed the vicious little spell before it could form.

I released my terminal's ironclad grip on the data-store's spell-matrix processes, and began perusing the thousands of files contained within. It was far too much to give more than a cursory skimming before we would have to hoof it over to Amber. If I was going to give the data the proper analysis that it deserved, I needed more time. To do so, I turned to Starlight.

Her hoof raised protectively to her PipBuck when I mentioned my plan. "But why do you have to use this? Don't you have a data-store? And didn't you say that one there has some dangerous spell in it?"

"My data-store is damaged," I said, resisting the urge to wilt at its mention. "I... I hope I can recover the information on it, but if I copy more onto it, I could destroy what's already there. My terminal has almost no storage, so your PipBuck is the only other option. As for the spell, it's not dangerous. I'll be copying the data through my terminal, and that means the data-store can only do something if I allow it. Even if that didn't work, it'd hit my terminal, not your PipBuck."

It took a bit more convincing, including some technical details that appeared to go well over her head, before she reluctantly passed her PipBuck to me. I plugged in both devices. The transfer went off without a hitch, much to Starlight's relief.

Fortunately, Starlight considered me a good enough of a friend to trust me further with her precious PipBuck. I had taken a spare strap from one of the bags Sickie carried through the day, and crudely fastened them to my terminal. The intent had been to keep it slung around my neck, like some crude and bulky mockery of Starlight's setup, in order to get a little bit of reading during the trip. Of course, that promised to be incredibly awkward, what with the tiny screen bouncing around on the bulky device, not to mention putting that much weight on my neck.

When she discovered my intention, she laughed, and offered to let me carry her PipBuck while we traveled, much to my neck's relief. I hugged her in thanks.

It was still awkward, naturally. The screen was actually larger than my portable terminal's, but I had to either stop walking or go on three legs whenever I needed to scroll or change files. At least I could get a little reading while we traveled.

Emphasis on "a little". There's only so much reading I can do from a bouncing screen while stumbling along uneven ground before my head starts feeling distinctly fuzzy. The entire day's worth of reading while walking probably added up to less than half an hour of reading while resting or eating, but at least it let me feel as if I were doing something with my time.



Black insectoid forms chased colorful ponies through the morning sky.

I had been making another attempt at reading when Starlight's faint gasp drew my attention first to her, then up in the direction she was looking. I stumbled at the sight, my gut lurching in shock.

They were descending rapidly, swerving around in corkscrew patterns. I couldn't even guess at the distance. Half a mile? A mile, at most? It was far enough that I could only make out the most vague of details. There was a blue-green blob and a yellow blob, the rapid beating of their wings only faintly visible as a vague suggestion of motion at their sides. Behind them flew two black forms, swerving and turning to track the colorful ponies before them, with the light glinting off their carapaces.

And I stared, mouth hanging open as I watched, desperately trying to shake myself from my shock and decide what to *do* about it.

I was not surprised—though perhaps a touch concerned—when the black forms began to fire magic at the ponies they chased. I *was* surprised, however, when they turned out to not be bolts of green, but sharp lines of pink. As they flew closer, I could pick out the hint of amber color of the black figures' eyes, and the thick tail trailing behind them. I let out the breath I had held, feeling a strange mixture of relief and disappointment.

They were just armored ponies. Given the survival of the Raptors and Thunderheads, I wasn't even surprised to see the now-ancient

pegasus power armors in action. I was only worried that these might be members of the Enclave that Dusty had mentioned; while I couldn't be certain how accurate his information was, it still painted a very negative picture of them.

Seeing a pair of power-armored pegasi chasing a pair of apparently unarmed ponies certainly lent credence to Dusty's claims.

Dusty had stopped beside me, his binoculars held up to his eyes. "Guess that must be the Enclave... chasing after some of their own?"

One of the pink beams struck the yellow pony. That pegasus flared pink for a moment, casting off trailing embers as the former pony burnt away like a disintegrating meteor. The blue-green pegasus swerved, narrowly evading a similar fate. The pops of the magical energy weapons' discharge echoed across the Wasteland a couple seconds later, the sound turned soft by the distance.

"Oh, shit," Starlight murmured, lowering her Lancer's scope to look wide-eyed at the scattering pink embers. Then her expression hardened, and she raised her weapon again.

Dusty shot an alarmed look her way, mouth opening to give a warning, but it never came. He stopped himself, then turned, looking back to the sky.

I heard the soft exhale of Starlight's breath. In the following silence, another pink beam found the blue-green pegasus, turning the pony's swerving dive into an uncontrolled plummet. An instant later, that shot was answered by the hissing crack of Starlight's Lancer, its crimson beam slicing through air and armor alike. One of the armored ponies tumbled wildly, scattering glowing motes of red from whatever part the magic had just incinerated. The other dark figure veered off sharply and pulled out of its dive. I could just make out the amber of the armored goggles as the pony searched for the source of the shot that had felled their companion.

Starlight stared grimly down her scope, her magic already opening the chamber at the weapon's rear. She continued to track the remaining pegasus; he arced around and began to dive again, aimed roughly in our direction and closing rapidly, while she swapped out the crystals and sealed her weapon again.

A moment later she fired; the red beam struck the pegasus in the chest, sending him tumbling.

It lasted only a moment before the pony stabilized, arcing up again and beating its wings hard to get distance.

“Son of a bitch!” Starlight snapped, and started to reload her rifle again. She grit her teeth, muttering under her breath as she tracked the pony’s evasive maneuvering. “Hell no, you’re not getting away with that, you...”

The chamber slammed shut. The magic lashed out, striking the fleeing pony’s side with a burst of glowing embers and burning feathers.

“Hah!” Starlight shouted, pumping a hoof in the air in celebration and grinning. “That’s what you get!”

The armored pony’s momentum carried him up for another second before gravity reasserted itself, and he fell toward the earth below. His legs flailed, the remaining wing flapping wildly as he tried to slow his descent.

Starlight’s victorious grin rapidly wilted as she watched the pony plummeting through the air. For several seconds, she seemed frozen. Then she blinked and started through the motions of reloading her Lancer.

By the time she had closed the chamber again, the pony had fallen behind a hill and out of sight. Starlight continued to stare, her ears drooping. Finally, she turned away, her voice quiet and subdued. “Come on, let’s go.”

I moved up to her side, intending to comfort her. I didn’t get the chance, as she cut me off before I could speak.

“I know,” she said, giving a faint, wry smile that died off a moment later. “I just... really didn’t mean for that to go quite the way it did.” She looked off to the side, toward the hill the falling pony had disappeared behind. “Seems like such a horrible way to go.”

I nearly winced when Sickie snorted, already anticipating her nastiness. “That was, what, ten seconds? Heh, you ain’t seen shit if you think *that* was a bad way to go.”

Starlight’s jaw tightened as she shot a glare back to Sickie, lacing her words with a nearly toxic amount of sarcasm. “Gee, thanks. That

helps so much.”

Sickle sneered back. “Any time, runt.”

“It was a good shot,” Dusty said, his eyes still sweeping around the sky. “But even a weapon as powerful as that can’t always kill cleanly.”

Starlight bristled, but Dusty wasn’t done. “But you tried, and that’s what matters.”

Those words knocked Starlight’s anger right out of her, and she eyed him questioningly. He didn’t look back, keeping his eyes scanning for further threats, which conveniently kept him from looking her way.

Eventually, she looked away again, seemingly satisfied with Dusty’s words. ■

“So, what?” Sickle said, following along. “We ain’t going to find and loot them?”

There was a momentary hitch in Starlight’s step, as if quickly considering and rejecting the idea.

“No,” Dusty said. “If those were Enclave, they might have gotten a radio call out to any of their buddies. Even if they didn’t, they’re going to have a superior officer that misses them soon. We want to get the hell out of here as quickly as possible.”

Sickle huffed quietly under her muzzle. “Run away from another fight. Sure, why not?”

Fortunately, she didn’t argue the point. We continued on, quickly slipping into silence once more.



By evening, we arrived at Rust.

Fatigue had become an issue, and not just for me. Starlight’s limp had returned. Both Silverline and Quicksilver were dragging their hooves. Even Sickle lagged behind, her hoof-falls heavy as she trudged along behind us. That ended when she downed another pill, which seemed to chase away her fatigue. Unfortunately, it also made her ever so slightly twitchy. The tip of her intact ear was just long enough to be visible, poking out of the small gap in her helmet designed for such a purpose, and it flicked and twitched at even the slightest sound. After the second time her head snapped around to stare at me for clipping a hoof against a rock—and therefore making noise near her—I kept my

distance.

Only Dusty seemed to fare well, despite always being on-guard. He kept sweeping his eyes around, watching out for any threats descending from the clouds. The skies remained quiet, dull, and gray.

It was a relief to see the armored walls of Rust again. Even Silverline gave a weak smile at the sight of safety, though her daughter kept her eyes down at her hooves.

Unlike our sighs of relief, Sickie grumbled at the sight. She sat back heavily, popping open one of her cases to root around, eventually producing a couple more pills and a bottle of hard cider. She didn't even bother removing her muzzle, simply slapping the pills in between the bars, then throwing her head back and lifting the bottle over her snout. She even managed to get most of the booze in her mouth.

Despite having some concerns about mixing pharmaceuticals and alcohol, I remained silent. Starlight, as usual, did not.

"How many drugs are you on, anyway?" she asked, frowning at the larger mare.

"The fuck do you care?" Sickie replied, tipping the bottle back once more to make sure she got every last drop.

"I only care because I have to be near you," Starlight replied, with only a hint of grumbling. "That, and you're drugging up before going into a town I kinda like, and I'd like the place to remain un-trashed."

Relatively speaking, I silently added.

"I ain't going to trash the fucking place," Sickie said, lowering her head to look at Starlight. A bit of cider dripped from her chin and muzzle. "This little shithole ain't worth it. But I gotta go in there and get my bounty, and I sure as *fuck* ain't dealing with Steel Shot's brahminshit sober."

As if to emphasize her point, she reared up on her hind legs and threw her bottle as hard as she could toward Rust. At that distance it didn't even make it halfway, bouncing once off the ground before shattering on one of the train tracks leading to the town. When I looked back, I saw Sickie was licking at the inside of her muzzle, completely preoccupied with getting the last bits of cider.

When we finally approached Rust, the welcome was somewhat less

warm than our previous visit. Steel Shot and his guards waited atop the walls, while the gate remained shut. Some of them had their weapons out and resting against the walls. Up in the central tower of the town, I could see a pony crewing their heavy gun.

I felt distinctly vulnerable as we walked closer.

It wasn't until we were about a hundred yards away when Steel Shot visibly relaxed, letting his gun hang against its strap. "Well, shit," he called out to us, across the distance. "If it was anypony other than you, Dusty, I'd have thought Sickle there had started up a new gang. What's got you two traveling together?"

The other guards started to relax as well as Dusty called back. "We needed an extra set of hooves to deal with a band of raiders. She's just here to collect the bounty."

"The usual, then," Steel Shot replied with a sense of weariness. "Well, come on in, might as well get this all over with."

He waved a hoof, and soon the gate began to open. A minute later, we were all inside. Steel Shot and a few of his guards had come down to greet us. Their angular armor, which had once struck me as heavy and tough, now seemed underwhelming when compared to Sickle's. Most of the guards looked wary. The armored red mare I had seen before watched Sickle with an intense glare.

"Good to see you're still in one piece," Steel Shot said as he stepped up to Dusty, and they shook hooves. "Was getting a bad feeling about your job and that strange little mare that hired you. Everything went well, then?"

"Was a bit more than we expected," Dusty said, "but nothing we couldn't handle. Anyway, Sickle here has a bunch of ears to turn in, and the rest of us are going to go find that 'strange little mare' to get our pay."

"Well, I'm sure you know where to find her," Steel Shot said. "Mustard said she's barely stepped hoof out of her room since you left." He then turned his attention to our newest traveling companions. "And you've made some new friends. Have we met before, miss...?"

When Silverline hesitated, Dusty was quick to cut in. "They hired me to escort them home. We'll be setting out again in the morning,

once we're done with our business here."

"We were with the water caravan," Silverline said. While everypony else looked at her, I noticed Dusty giving a faint grimace. It seems I was the only one to see it.

"You were?" Steel Shot asked, raising an eyebrow. "Then what are you doing—" He halted abruptly, his eyes widening before looking to Dusty. "Oh, no. You don't mean—"

"Afraid so," Dusty said, slowly shaking his head. "They got hit by the same band of raiders we came across. We came across these two, decided we'd make sure they get home safe and sound."

"But—"

Sickle's growling voice cut through the conversation. "The fuck did you just say?"

Everypony's heads snapped around to look at her, matching glares with the red guard-mare. Despite the guard's own metal armor, it was a ridiculously mismatched face-off. That didn't seem to faze the red mare, as she didn't give an inch. Instead, she sneered back at Sickle. "Nothing."

"That's fucking right," Sickle said, advancing a step to press her face close to the other mare's. "That's all you fucking are, you little cunt, and you better remember it."

Steel Shot stepped forward and raised a hoof, trying to intervene. "Hey now, calm down, there—"

Sickle wheeled around on him. "And fuck you too, Steel! How many raiders have I killed for you and your little fuckstain town? You dumb cunts ought to be licking my fucking hooves for everything I've done for you, but every time I come in it's nothing but bitching and moaning. How about you start showing a little fucking respect?"

The red mare muttered loud enough to be sure we could all hear it. "How about you start acting in a way that deserves it."

Sickle turned back to her, baring her teeth as she growled. "Steel? You better get over here and shove your dick down this cunt's throat before she says something you're both going to regret."

"Sickle," Starlight called out, with a warning tone to her voice. Sickle turned on her.

“Oh, fuck off, Star! Mind your own fucking business for a change.” Sickle shuddered, shaking her head for a moment as if she were shaking water out of her mane, then turned back to the red guard-mare. Then she stopped, seeing Steel Shot whispering to the mare. She continued to stare for several seconds until the other mare gave a quiet snort and nodded to Steel Shot. With a final glare Sickle’s way, she turned and walked away with barely restrained rage.

“There,” Steel Shot said, doing his best to be calm and conciliatory. “That better? We’re all friends here, right?”

Sickle snorted, looking one last time at the guard-mare, storming off into town, before looking back at Steel. “Better for now.”

“Okay, good,” Steel Shot said, nodding. “So... we’ve got business to talk, then? Well, uh... let’s step into my office, we can get this all sorted out.”

“About fucking time,” Sickle muttered.

This time, it was Dusty who decided to speak out in warning. “Sickle...”

Her head snapped around toward him, and I got the distinct impression that she was only a few words away from murdering somepony.

I quickly lifted a hoof, placing it gently on Dusty’s shoulder. The unexpected contact drew a start from him, cutting off what he was going to say next. He looked to me, while I gave my best soft, gently concerned look in reply, while desperately hoping he’d get the message.

After a couple seconds, the tightness that had grown in his jaw slowly relaxed, and he let out a quiet sigh before looking back to Sickle. “We’re going to go talk to Amber to get the rest of our pay. You can meet us at Mustard’s place after you’re done here, to get your cut.” He hesitated for a moment before adding, “And try not to get into *too* much trouble.”

Sickle just snorted out a dry chuckle before turning away and walking toward the small building we had been led into our first night in Rust. “Come on, Steel. You owe me some caps.”

With our volatile and foul-mouthed powder keg seemingly appeased for the moment, we parted ways, heading toward Mustard’s inn.

“Eesh,” Starlight quietly murmured. “And that’s *after* medicating

herself. I don't know if she'd be better or *worse* sober."

"Hard to be much worse," Dusty said.

"She didn't kill anyone," I pointed out. Dusty merely shrugged.

We met with Mustard, arranging for three rooms for the night. Dusty paid for Silverline and Quicksilver's room. Once we had gotten them settled in and unloaded our spare bags of goods, we went to see Amber.

Dusty's knocking was answered by a bored, condescending response. "Who is it?"

"Dusty."

Once again, we were answered by the sound of hoofsteps and shifting furniture before the door opened to reveal "Lady" Amber, looking as elegant and haughty as ever. "And am I to assume that you have completed your task?"

"We have," he replied. "Whisper?"

I stuck my snout into my bag and pulled out the data-store. The moment I held it out, Amber snatched it away from me. "Good. I will verify the data, and if it is as you say, I will return with your reward."

With that, she shut the door in our faces.

Or at least, she would have, if Dusty hadn't put a hoof in the way. Amber, who had just started to turn away, stopped and shot him a sharp glare.

"I don't think so," Dusty said, meeting her glare. "We went through a lot for that data, and it's not leaving our sight until we get paid for it. And before you think of anything funny with your 'verifying', the deal was to get you whatever was on those servers. We did that. If that data ain't what you expected, it's not our problem."

Amber held firm. "But it is your problem if the data isn't what you claim it to be, or from where you claim to have gotten it. Hence, I must verify the data."

"Then you do that," Dusty said. "But that thing's staying right where I can see it until we've got our caps."

Amber tilted her head every so slightly, regarding him for several seconds. "Fine. One of you may enter and watch over it while I check the data."

“All of us.”

Amber’s lip twitched, eyes narrowing again. “And leave myself surrounded by mercenaries, outnumbered and out of sight, with thousands of caps on the line? I think not.”

Dusty scowled. “If we were going to rob you, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. We would have forced our way in the moment you unbarricaded the door. You, on the other hoof, have five thousand little reasons to try and pull a fast one on us.”

She stared at him for several long seconds. Finally she stepped back, letting the door swing open again. “Very well.” She turned, eying us over her shoulder as she walked over to the bed and the saddlebags set beside it. “To be just as infantile as you are acting, you shall stay on your side of the room, and I shall stay on mine.”

“Works for me,” Dusty said as he walked into the room, and we followed, single file. He sat and took a load off, shucking his saddlebags and unslinging his rifle. I noted that it also left his rifle within quick reach. I followed his lead.

Amber made a point of turning to face us as she set the data-store on the bed, then lifted her bags onto the bed. She gave us a wary look before nudging a flap open and slipping her muzzle in, searching around. We waited, patiently.

Finally, she found what she was searching for. She drew back, a pistol aimed straight at Dusty. “Uhhn oohf.”

Dusty twitched, but thought better of trying to out-draw a mare who already had a pistol leveled at him. I have to admire his composure, though. The shock of adrenaline tore at my nerves, and I had to fight to keep myself still. Dusty, however, looked perfectly calm, though I could see the fire in his eyes. “You don’t want to do that.”

“Eh-ahhgs,” Amber mumbled around the grip of her pistol. “Eh uh eh-hah-hun.”

Dusty merely blinked. “You’re not very good at that. I can’t understand a thing you’re saying.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she pointed the muzzle of her gun towards his hooves, then gestured upward. Reluctantly, Dusty raised his fore-hooves. Starlight and I followed suit.

Keeping her eyes on us as best she could, Amber reached a hoof into her bag. After a couple tugs, I was relieved to see her pull a computer cable from the bag. She blindly fumbled with the data-store until she got the cable plugged into it. Then her hoof returned to the bag, opening it enough that she could see inside, though her eyes remained on us at first. The pistol remained steady, even when she cast a quick glance down and back again.

I became increasingly aware of the way Starlight was watching Amber's actions. "Stay calm," I whispered. "We're good."

The pistol jerked over in my direction, making me twitch. "Eye-uhh." I reached my hooves a little higher, and the muzzle returned to Dusty.

We remained like that for almost a minute as Amber poked at something within her bag. I heard the occasional, quiet beep. Finally, her shoulders relaxed. Keeping her eyes locked squarely on us, she crouched down, reaching under the bed. After a couple probes, she found what she was looking for, and dragged out a large bag, about the size of both my saddlebags combined. I could see the effort it took as she hefted it in her hooves, then tossed it before us. It landed with a solid thump and a loud jingle.

She followed up by tossing her pistol onto the bed. "There's your payment."

She hadn't even finished the sentence before Dusty was on his hooves, his rifle pointed at her. He practically growled around the bit, speaking much more clearly than she had. "I don't appreciate being held at gunpoint by my so-called 'employer'."

"And *I* don't appreciate being intimidated and bullied by two-bit thugs that kill other ponies for caps," she replied, glaring haughtily down her snout. She showed no concern over the large rifle leveled at her. "Given your propensity towards violence, I took a reasonable precaution in case your data turned out to be fraudulent. Now I have the data my patron wants, and you have the money you want. Seeing as neither of us have anything more to be gained here, you should leave."

Though she did a good job of acting confident, I'd been taught to look for the more subtle signs. They were all there: the tension in her

neck and jaw, the steady but deep breaths to conceal a need for more rapid breathing, even the way the hairs of her coat raised slightly. As odd as it might sound, those hints of fear spoke well of her, though it made me feel even more uncomfortable. She knew exactly how much danger she was in, but was remaining calm.

Dusty, meanwhile, looked as if he was seriously contemplating murdering her. It wasn't until I had picked up the bag of caps that he finally lowered the weapon. He didn't even say anything, simply tossing his saddlebags across his back and storming out.

The door slammed shut behind us, followed by the sound of the dresser being pushed back across it.

"Glad that's done with," Dusty muttered.

Starlight abruptly spun around, reared back, and bucked both hind-hooves against the wall. I jumped a bit, and Starlight stumbled forward from her kick. She trembled. "Holy *fuck!* That... that..." She let out a strangled growl and stomped on the ground. "Great. Now I'm sympathizing with Sickie. That stupid bitch!"

Dusty grunted. "Let's go downstairs, get some drinks, and cool off."

"Yeah, right," Starlight said, her hooves shaking as she followed him. "We're in town! It's supposed to be safe in town! We're not supposed to get guns pulled on us in town!"

"Wish it was that simple," Dusty said. We'd made it to the corner of the hall, near the stairs, when he sighed and came to a halt. "Put the bag down."

"Huh?" I mumbled around the strap of the bag, raising an eyebrow questioningly.

"I want to check it," he said. "Make sure she isn't screwing us."

I set it down, while Starlight stepped up to peer over his shoulder. "You think she didn't give us all our pay?"

"I'm more worried she put a bomb in here," Dusty said, and Starlight immediately took a step back. I almost did the same, though I recognized it as pointless. If Dusty's worry proved accurate, I doubt a single step would make a difference.

He opened the flap, revealing the huge pile of pristine bottle caps that filled the bag. He then plunged his hoof into it. Caps rattled and

clanked as he slowly fished around inside the bag, rolling it from side to side, thoroughly checking every inch. Finally he drew his hoof out, picking out a single bottle cap. "Looks like we don't have any explosive surprises waiting for us."

"Shiny," Starlight said as she stepped up, levitating out one of the caps. "I don't think I've ever seen bottle caps so clean. Or so many of them at once, for that matter."

Dusty was frowning down at his cap. "I'm kind of concerned by that. Why are they so clean? And they look kinda weird, for some reason."

"Yeah, they do," Starlight said, a smile slowly spreading. "These caps aren't... crimped? I think that's the word."

"What do you mean?"

Starlight's smile had grown into a wide grin. "I mean, I'm pretty sure these caps have never been used."

Dusty continued to stare at his cap for a few seconds before his ears shot up, his eyes widening, and he turned to Starlight. "You don't think..."

"Mmm-hmm!" Starlight grinned, flicking her cap back into the bag. "Explains how her mystery patron guy has so many caps to throw around."

Dusty gave a low whistle, looking back to the cap in his hoof with something bordering on reverence.

Feeling entirely out of the loop, I had to step in. "I have the feeling I'm missing something again."

Starlight chuckled. "You know how much soda ponies drank back before the megaspells, right?"

Let's see. The population of Equestria, times the percentage that drank soda, times the average number of bottles consumed per day, and the answer was: "A lot."

"A hell of a lot," Starlight said. "A bottle factory could put out tens, hell, *hundreds* of thousands of bottles in a freaking day, and every single one of those needed bottle caps. Finding an intact bottling factory... that's like every scavenger's dream. That's the kind of find you can retire off of. Fuck, your *kids* could retire off that."

"If you live that long," Dusty said, placing his cap back in the bag and closing it before looking to me. "Have you heard of... right, you grew up under a rock." He looked to Starlight. "Have *you* heard of the Soda War?"

"The what now?"

Dusty huffed out a dry chuckle as he stood, and I picked up the bag of caps once more to follow him. "Don't know if it's a true story," he said, "but it sounded true enough. Way I heard it, it was way up north, near Manehattan or something, and about a hundred years ago. Somepony found an untouched Sparkle-Cola plant and managed to disable the defenses. He got wagon-loads of caps out of it. Literally tons. I'm not entirely clear on the details, but the way I hear it, things went to shit as soon as other ponies found out. Something about trade collapsing, two successful settlements dying off, cannibalism, that kind of stuff. Whole area was depopulated for decades afterwards. Ponies get stupid around caps."

"All because of bottle caps," I muttered, shaking my head.

"Yep," Dusty said, oblivious to my own continuing internal incredulity over the current state of Equestrian economics. "But it's a good reason for Amber's employer to keep to the shadows."

"Also means they may have a lot more caps to offer to anyone needing work," Starlight said. That said work had resulted in her employer pulling a gun on her seemed to have been forgotten already.

Dusty, however, certainly remembered. "I'm not keen on having anything to do with them. If they come to me with a job offer, I might consider it, but I'd be looking over the job very carefully before accepting. Other than that, I'll keep my distance. This has 'volatile' written all over it."

We started making our way downstairs. We got as far as the first landing when Starlight stopped. "Uh... I kinda just thought of something."

The rest of us stopped, looking back to her. "What's that?" I asked. "Well... that Amber mare seems a bit sketchy, right?"

Dusty snorted. "That's one way of putting it."

"Yeah," Starlight said. "And she hired us to do a job, which just

happened to get us in a fight with a bunch of raiders, who had just *happened* to have gotten some outside help taking down a caravan...”

Dusty stared off into space for several seconds before replying. “I don’t know. Seems a bit convoluted to me.”

Starlight turned to me. “What about you? What do you think?”

“It’s... suspicious,” I said, “but also very circumstantial. I wouldn’t dismiss the idea outright. It’s certainly plausible, and I’m always a little wary of coincidence, but it seems unlikely.”

Starlight frowned, even though I hadn’t completely shot down her idea. “Why’s that?”

“She seemed far more concerned with what was on the data store, to the point of escalating a tense situation over it. I suppose a clever individual could have done that as an act to lure us away from her true motivations, but it’s quite the gamble. More notably, though, she didn’t inquire into what happened out there. If she were using us to hide her tracks, or her patron’s, I’d expect her to want to know what happened to the raiders. After all, we came very close to getting through the whole outing without alerting them.”

Starlight’s frown held, though she relented with a sigh. “I suppose.”

Seeing her looking so down at the refutation of her theory, I offered a little bit of consolation. “But, like I said, I wouldn’t dismiss the idea outright. She could still be involved, somehow.”

Dusty grunted. “If you really want to find out who set the whole thing up, there’s only one set of ponies we know for sure were involved, and that’s the worthless mercs that walked off and left those ponies to die. Ponies like that, I’ll bet they get to talking right quick when you push ‘em.”

“And they’re not likely to show their faces around Rust *or* Mareford,” I noted. “The best lead on who they are and where they went would probably be whoever hired them to guard the caravan.”

“Yep,” Dusty said, giving a grim smile. “And that’s why I want to have a nice long chat with Big Gun when we get to Mareford.”

When we finally got downstairs, Dusty generously ordered a round of ciders for all of us. I don’t particularly like alcohol, between the chemical taste and the deleterious effect it has upon mental faculties, but

it was necessary on occasion. I was not in the position to be shunning a social gesture just yet, so I graciously accepted his offer, and made a point of hiding my distaste whenever I took a sip.

Alcohol tasted bad enough even when it wasn't two hundred years past its prime.

We sat and waited, with a little idle chit-chat. I don't remember all of what was said. Mostly, it was the kind of forgettable, meaningless, time-passing chatter that fills the need for social interaction. Only one part of the conversation stuck in my memory as notable, after Starlight asked Dusty if he'd ever been up north to where he'd been talking about.

"Nah," he replied, taking a small draw from his bottle before continuing on. "Furthest north I've ever been was Appleloosa. Or... Old Appleloosa, I guess, since some ponies made a new one way down the rails and couldn't come up with a new name." He paused, glancing around at us in a way that suggested he was hesitant to continue. "I saw an alicorn there."

"Really?" Starlight said, perking up as the conversation suddenly became interesting.

"Yep," Dusty said, nodding. "Was working as a guard for a caravan, 'bout three or four months ago. The pony running it heard that there were ponies living in Appleloosa again, so he thought he'd go up there, hit an untapped market and all that. No pony ran trade routes up north.

"So we get there, and you know, I like being cautious. I had the caravan wait while I climbed up a ridge and glassed the place. Damn good thing I did, too. I couldn't make out too much at that range, even with my binocs, but the ponies there didn't look too savory. They didn't look as wild and disorganized as your typical raider, but it was close. They weren't the worst, though. That was the alicorn."

He paused, pulling out a cigarette, and took his time lighting it. Starlight leaned in, anticipation growing with every moment. I partially hid my smirk behind a bottle, and caught the corner of Dusty's lips twitch upwards in response. Finally, Starlight prompted him. "...And?"

Dusty took a deep draw, then blew out a long, thin stream of smoke—and I'll note, he blew it away from us, a courtesy some ponies never grasped. "And, I got a good view of her frying some pony's brain.

She lit up her horn, and the pony standing in front of her dropped and started flailing around like he was burning alive. Shit, I must have been at least a thousand yards out, and I could *still* hear him screaming.

“So I just turned right around, and we all got the fuck out of there.”

Starlight sat back, looking thoughtful. “You don’t think it was the same one, do you?”

“Not unless they can change color,” he said, taking another draw from his cigarette. “That one was dark green, not purple. Way I hear it, there are a lot of them alicorns. Though last I heard, a bunch of them got blown up.”

“Heard from where?” I asked. Sources of information were a valuable commodity.

“Traders,” he replied. “Not from up north, mind you. I don’t think anyone ranges past Old Appleloosa. But Mareford’s close enough that they pick up some radio broadcasts from the north, and the news slowly trickles out from there. Mostly, it makes me glad I’m down here, instead. The north sounds like shit.”

We were still quietly contemplating that when the door slammed open, and Sickle walked in, carrying even more bags than the last time we saw her. Dusty sighed, muttering something under his breath as she approached.

“Hey, cunts,” Sickle said, grinning from behind her muzzle. At least she seemed to be in a good mood. “You got the caps?”

“Yeah,” Dusty said, patting a hoof on the bag, which gave a faint jingle. Then he eyed the new bags on her back. “Did you go shopping?”

“Yep. Steel didn’t have a thousand caps on him. I was just going to beat the last six hundred out of him, but he got the store owner to make up the difference. Hope you bitches didn’t want any chems or booze. I cleaned him out.”

She sat down with a crash of metal armor, the many bags on her back clanking as they slid to the floor.

“I think we’re good,” Dusty said, tapping a hoof against his empty bottle.

“Yeah, I don’t really give a shit,” Sickle said. “Just give me my caps, already.”

In the end, we agreed that counting out fifteen hundred caps each would be way too tedious. Instead, Dusty added the caps we had gotten up-front—which, upon inspection, turned out to be just as clean and unused as the rest—and divided the lot into four evenly sized piles. Sickie insisted on getting first pick, and claimed a pile she was certain was the largest.

Starlight and I kept our piles separate, not because we were terribly concerned about whose money it really was, but more because it was a *lot* of caps, and I would have felt guilty making her carry all of it herself. I had never before had to measure currency in pounds.

As we started packing the caps, Sickie asked, “So, you’re all running off to Mareford, huh?”

Dusty grunted, securing the sizable bag of money in his packs. “Yeah. What of it?”

Sickie shrugged, metal plates clanking with the motion. “I figured I’d tag along, see what happens.”

Starlight’s head snapped up from packing her own bags, and she blurted out a sharp, “What?”

“Why?” Dusty asked, his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Why not?” Sickie replied, grinning. “This was fun, and I’m betting you fuckers won’t go a week without stirring up some shit. What else would I do? Lie around that little shitstain of a hut, getting high all on my own? Sounds boring as shit. You cunts are a lot more entertaining.”

After a pause, her grin grew a bit more. “Sides, I kinda like Star.”

Starlight blinked. “Oh, fuck no. *No*. You’re not coming with us.”

Sickie leaned over the table, one heavy, metal-clad hoof thumping down on top of it. “I’d like to see you stop me,” she said, still grinning.

Starlight stared, mouth hanging open as she completely failed to come up with a retort. That lasted right up until Sickie reached out and snagged her half-empty bottle, which only made it halfway back to her before Starlight’s magic yanked it out of her grasp. “Hey! You’ve got your own damn booze!”

Sickie chuckled, then looked back at Dusty. “So yeah, I think I’ll stick around for a while. ‘Till I get bored of you, anyway.”

Dusty grumbled for a moment before replying. “If you’re going to

insist on tagging along with us, you'd better be on your best behavior."

"Yeah, yeah, no killing and raping all the innocent townsfolk and traders. I got it."

"And maybe lay off the drugs a bit," Starlight muttered.

I felt compelled to add to the objections. "And the profanity, while we're at it."

She pointed a hoof at me. "Fuck you." Then she looked back to Starlight. "And what the fuck's your problem with my drugs? How about you get on Dusty's case about his fucking smoking." She leered at him. "That shit's just nasty."

Dusty groaned and stood. "Yeah, screw this. I'm going to bed. We're heading out in the morning. Feel free to sleep in and miss it."

"Need any company?" she said, grinning in a way I could only describe as cruel. "Maybe getting laid would help your shitty attitude. How long has it been, anyway?"

"Don't remember," Dusty growled, finishing off his bottle and grabbing his bags. "Was too damn drunk."

"Oh, shit!" Sickie said, laughing. "That long? Hah! You mean you've been traveling around with a whole herd of mares and you ain't fucked any of them? You've got to be the dumbest motherfucker I know!"

She continued laughing as Dusty walked off, and ignored Starlight's disapproving glower. The laughter died off as he slipped out of sight. A moment later she wobbled, and abruptly shook her head violently. Both Starlight and I cringed back from the spear-like horn, though it thankfully didn't come near us. After a moment Sickie stopped, leaning against the table. In the dark recesses of her helm's eye-slits, the faint light reflecting from her eyes flickered as she blinked several times.

"Uh, you okay there?" Starlight asked, sounding far more skeptical than concerned.

"Sorry," Sickie rumbled, and raised a hoof to rub at the side of her armored head. "Mixing Buck and painkillers always gets weird. 'Specially with booze."

Starlight stared at her as if Sickie had just grown a second head. "Did... you just apologize?"

Sickle's hoof dropped as she looked at Starlight, simply blinking for a few seconds. "...The fuck are you talking about?"

"Never mind," Starlight said, rolling her eyes. "I must have heard wrong."

"Yeah, whatever," Sickle said, slowly rolling her head around and stretching. "Shit. Yeah, think I'll hit the hay, too. So Dirt's being a little bitch, guess that means I'm bunking with you two."

Starlight's expression hardened instantly. "You can get your own room, Sickle."

Sickle shrugged. "Worth a try. Hey, Ketchup!"

The stallion, who had been doing quite a good job of staying well clear of us, sighed from the counter at the front of the room. "It's Mustard."

"I don't give a shit. I need a room."

Starlight and I decided it would be a good idea to retire, too, but I had one thing I wanted to do. One thing that, while I had little hope of succeeding, I had to at least try. So I delayed, nursing my bottle of cider so that we headed to our room at the same time as Sickle. As the three of us walked to our rooms, I turned to Sickle, speaking quietly.

"Hey, Sickle? Could I talk to you for a moment?"

She snorted, not even looking at me as she walked. "Yeah. Talk."

"In private?"

She bared her teeth in a grin. "Shit, I ain't shy, Whimper. If you want to get under my tail, just dive right in. I don't mind an audience."

"I mean talk. Literally."

She groaned, and from the movement of her head I guessed she was wasting a perfectly good eye-roll behind that thick helm of hers. Despite the protest, she did stop. "Fiiine."

Starlight gave me a concerned look, but I replied with a smile and a nod, and after a moment of hesitation she went on without us. I waited until she had passed around the next corner before turning back to Sickle.

"I understand that you have this violent, angry persona," I said, trying to sound as gentle as possible. "I can see that being very useful, with the way the world is, and I'm not going to try to convince you

otherwise.”

Her head slowly turned until she was staring straight at me, silent.

“But you don’t need to be relentlessly aggressive to keep that perception intact. We’ve all seen what you can do. You’re the strongest pony I’ve ever seen, and you shrugged off attacks that would have likely killed any of us. Everypony knows you’re big and powerful and not to be messed with.”

She continued to stare.

“You don’t need to be so hard on Dusty and Starlight just to keep us thinking that. We get it. It’s just... there’s a time and a place for aggression. Friendly ponies are a lot more likely to be helpful, but they don’t remain friendly for long if somepony is constantly insulting or threatening them. I think if you’d save the aggression for fighting, or when somepony is actually insulting you, you’d find things go a lot more smoothly.”

Still, she remained silent.

“I mean... ponies tend to respond the way they’ve been treated, right? Threatening a pony that’s been insulting you encourages them to not threaten you, but if you’re threatening a pony that’s been trying to help you, it just encourages them to not help you. If you want a pony to do something for you, they’re a lot more inclined to do that if you’ve been good to them. Or... at least, not *bad* to them. So...”

The silence lingered on for several more seconds as I trailed off, hoping to prompt her into replying. It’s incredibly hard to get a good read on a pony when you can see only the barest hint of their eyes.

Finally, she broke the silence. “You’re a talker.”

I blinked. “Um... I guess I am?”

She moved forward. It wasn’t particularly quick, but it didn’t have to be; she was so huge, I had nowhere to go. A moment later she shoved me up against the wall, her foreleg nearly cutting off my breath as it pressed against my neck. The blades welded to the leg armor arced up beside my head, thankfully pointing away.

She leaned in close, giving me a good face-full of her sour breath. “I’m not. I actually *do* shit instead of just whining about it all day.” She lowered her head, and I winced back as the blade-like horn lowered

just above my face. Her free hoof jabbed up, pointing at it. "You see this horn?"

I gripped at the foreleg pinning me to the wall, trying to relieve the pressure of being held up in such a fashion. It was hard to speak, but I managed. "Yeah, I see it."

"Good," she said, raising her head and pressing her armored muzzle against my snout. We were so close that I could make out her eyes in the darkness of her helm, narrowed to angry slits. "Because I'm going to face-fuck you with this horn if you keep running your little cunt mouth. Got it?"

I nodded. The pressure on my neck had increased, and I made little choking sounds every time I struggled to breathe in.

Then the pressure relented as she threw me to the side. I hit the floor and rolled onto my back, coughing. Sickie sneered down at me.

"See? I can get ponies to do what I want just fine." She walked off, making me wince as an armored hoof clopped heavily beside my head. "See you in the morning, Whimper."

I lay there until she had disappeared around the corner, and I heard the sound of a door shutting. Only then did I finally haul myself up, slowly making my way to my own room as I fought against the trembling in my limbs.

I had the feeling our little trip was going to be a lot more tiring than I had expected.

Chapter Eleven

Mareford

“It’s a three day trip to Mareford, if we keep to a steady pace. I figure we’ve got enough supplies, but if there’s anything you’re going to need, you better get it now.”

That was the advice Dusty gave us as we walked to the store with the “Stuff” sign, our bag of looted weapons and ammo in tow for trade. Silverline and Quicksilver were waiting in the “Food” shop, enjoying a fresh-cooked meal courtesy of Starlight.

With an abundance of food and more than a hundred rounds for my rifle, there was little that I could ask for. In fact, only two things came to mind.

The first was a bust. Given the violence we had encountered, I was re-evaluating my prior decision on armored barding. Sadly, none of the armors they had in Rust were to my taste. All of them looked far too thick and heavy for me, all consisting of thick metal plates. While I wanted protection, that wouldn’t do me any good if it left me too slow to keep out of danger, not to mention the concerns of being worn out even before a fight started simply from hauling the armor around.

Fortunately, the other item I looked for was one they had.

Dusty looked a little confused when I returned, grinning. Then he saw the binoculars hung around my neck, and started to chuckle.

“I figured I’ve been borrowing yours enough,” I said, and he nodded appreciatively. And you know, I actually felt a bit of affection from him. It wasn’t a lot, just enough to know that he had decided he liked me more than he hated me, but it was there. That really helped my mood. It felt like progress.

Granted, that mood was slightly dampened when I stepped out of the store to see Sickle sitting outside.

She concerned me. Not just for the obvious reason of being a huge, violent, profanity-prone potential psychopath, although that certainly didn’t help. The bigger reason was that I didn’t understand her. I didn’t get how she worked, how she thought. When your job is manipulating

ponies to achieve your goals, you rely entirely upon understanding how they think. Sickie, though, was alien to me, and that scared me more than any of her threats. It meant I couldn't be sure of how she'd react, if something I said would make her laugh or send her into a murderous rage. It meant I had to place my trust in Dusty and Starlight, and their understanding of her.

For an Infiltrator, this was very unfamiliar territory.

I did realize then that it was perhaps foolish to have thought I understood her as well as I did. Ponies are the product of the world around them, at least in part. I didn't understand this new, broken world I found myself in. How could I expect to properly understand the ponies that grew up with it?

I may have figured out many of the parts, but I clearly had more to learn.

I followed Dusty as he returned to the "Food" store, to meet up with our newest traveling companions. They were picking at the last of their food when we entered. Quicksilver looked like she was trying to hide behind the table as much as she could while still reaching her plate, her eyes fixed downward. Her ears flicked when Dusty spoke, but she didn't look up.

"We're about set to head out, if you two are ready," Dusty said to Silverline. "Are you both good to make the trip? We might be able to find a cart if walking will be a problem."

"No," Silverline quickly replied, then more quietly, "No, thank you. We can walk."

Dusty frowned, but nodded. "Okay, then."

Ten minutes later, we were assembled at the town gate as it slowly ground open. The days of travel ahead loomed large before us. My legs practically ached at the thought of it, made all the worse by the ever-increasing load I was carrying.

But at the same time, I had a substantial amount of currency, at least one friend, and once we'd escorted our charges to Mareford, a complete lack of commitments tying us down. While I had almost nothing in the way of leads towards any remnants of my hive, Starlight seemed fairly impulsive and suggestible. It shouldn't be too hard to convince

her to go the way I wanted.

It was time to move beyond simply struggling to survive, and on to accomplishing something useful.

As we set out past those gates and into the Wasteland once more, each step I took was one step closer to my kin, wherever they might be.



I have no idea what Rotwater Creek might have been called before the end of the world, but the name seemed perfectly fitting for what it had become. The thin trickle passing through the ravine looked more like sludge than water, and the dead brush and occasional bone down there suggested that it was anything but healthy. The ravine itself seemed little more than a deep crack, splitting the rugged hills our thin trail passed through. It was maybe fifty feet across, and not even half that deep. A bridge of crudely lashed timbers crossed it, looking ancient and ramshackle.

Beyond it, partially hidden behind the slope of a hill, lay the charred and broken remains of a wagon. A few crows gathered there, cawing idly.

Dusty lowered his binoculars and sighed. His cigarette rolled between his lips as he contemplated the situation. After several seconds, he looked around, his eyes finally alighting upon the ridge beside us.

“Starlight, set yourself up there, get good eyes out over the path ahead.” When she nodded, he looked to Silverline. “You two can stay with her. We just need to check it out real quick, then we can all go around it.”

“Wait,” Silverline said, and turned to her daughter. Her voice was quiet, gentle, and perfectly motherly. “Stay with Miss Starlight, honey. You’ll be safe with her.”

Starlight’s smile vanished as she gave a grim, serious nod in reply. Quicksilver simply looked up to her mother, eyes wide and nervous, but she swallowed and nodded.

“I’ll be right back,” Silverline said, wrapping her daughter up in a hug. “I promise.”

When she finally released her daughter again, Silverline turned to

Dusty. "I'm coming with you."

Dusty chewed on the end of his cigarette. "You sure you—"

"Yes."

After a moment of silent consideration, Dusty slowly nodded. "All right then."

We waited while Starlight climbed the ridge, with Quicksilver reluctantly following. She kept glancing back to her mother, who held a weak, shaky smile. Eventually, Silverline spoke again. "I don't want to drag her through all of this again," she said, her fragile smile holding, "but I need to take care of things. I need to..."

Dusty and I both nodded, silent. Sickie just snorted, and I couldn't help but read a sense of disdain into the simple sound.

Once Starlight was in place, we moved forward.

As we followed the uneven path, we came around the slope of the hill, revealing the vehicular carnage ahead.

Several wagons lay, gutted by flame. Giant water-tanks, with wooden frames and massive wheels to carry them through the desert, lay on their sides beside the path, destroyed. A few bullet holes marred the metal surfaces, while the impact with the ground looked to have split them both open. The dirt was still dark and muddy around them.

And then there were the bodies.

I suppose it was some small comfort that the scene could have been much worse. They weren't decaying, butchered corpses, like we had found at the Army depot. They weren't even like some of the raiders from a few nights back, looking almost alive except for the vacant, unseeing stares and splotches of blood. The ponies of the caravan had been picked over by scavengers, leaving little more than discolored bones among the ragged tatters of barding and bits of flesh. A few crows still lingered, picking at the scant bits of meat that remained. They cawed loudly before moving away, keeping their distance from us.

Beside me, Silverline was breathing deep and steady as she walked with us.

On my other side, Sickie had a faint, almost content-looking smile. I had to suppress a shudder.

I guessed about ten ponies had died there, though it was hard to

tell for sure. Bones were scattered around. I spotted a partial skeleton at the edge of one of the ruined water tanks, as if the pony had been crushed by it.

The largest collection of bones was by the front-most of three wagons. Spent casings lay among the bones, and the wagon itself, while not burnt like the others, was riddled with holes. The mercenaries hired to guard the caravan may have left them to their fate, but some of these ponies had been armed, and they had fought back. Unfortunately, Gutrip's raiders had prevailed.

More disturbing were the traces left by those raiders. A pole was planted in the ground beside the wagon, with a skull impaled upon it and several bones scattered around. Several ropes were tied to various points on the wagon and the wrecked water tank nearby, hanging slack. Most of the loops were vacant, but a few still held bones that hadn't been pried away. Whatever vile display the raiders had established had been mostly undone by scavengers feeding on the remains.

While Sickie walked right up to the wagon and started searching, Silverline held back. She took a few deep breaths before turning and walking. Despite the faint tremble in her jaw, there was a look of desperate determination to her expression; a hardness in her eyes that threatened to crack at any moment, but which held firm.

She didn't walk toward any of the wagons, but toward a low ridge a short distance away from the ruined caravan.

As we approached, I soon saw the signs of prior travel. Dead brush lay broken and hoofprints marred the sandy dirt, indicating the passage of several ponies. Silverline followed that trail.

Coming over the ridge, we saw the remains of a simple camp. A few rocks and dead logs were pulled around the ashes of a long-dead fire, likely to serve as places to sit. Two skeletons lay there. One was set beside the makeshift seating. The other was a bit more scattered. While the limbs and skull had fallen to the ground, the pelvis and ribcage were still hung up on a spit running over the crude fire-pit.

My stomach turned at the implications.

Before anyone calls me out for hypocrisy, there's a huge difference between a changeling feeding on ponies' emotions and what those

raiders did. I try my best to avoid bringing harm to the ponies I feed upon. In fact, I generally try to help them, both before and after.

And no, that one raider mare doesn't count.

Silverline hesitated for a moment before continuing on toward the camp, though her pace had slowed. She slowed further as she moved between a couple dead logs, practically creeping up on the fire-pit. She finally stopped, staring down at the pony's skull. Tears were slowly running down her cheeks as she lifted a shaking hoof and reached out, gingerly touching it.

She remained silent, except for her ragged breathing. I carefully stepped up to her, hoping I could express some sympathy, rather than leaving her silent and alone. I spoke, quiet and gentle. "Who is it?"

She swallowed, slowly brushing her hoof down along the top of the snout. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse. "My husband." She lowered her hoof to the ground again, blinking away the tears. "I-I had to come, to... to put him to rest." She swallowed, her eyes slowly moving to the other skeleton. "And the others, too."

A tremble passed through her, but she huffed out a deep breath. Then she knelt down, gingerly reaching down to pick up her husband's skull.

When she tried to pull down the spit, I moved in without a word to take the other end. Dusty and I helped her gather up the bones, and she pulled out her blanket to carry them. We set them down gently, respectfully.

Once both skeletons had been set on the blanket, Dusty helped her carry it back to the ruins of the caravan, to the wagon where most of the ponies had fallen. We spread out, slowly gathering all the remains and setting them together in a slowly growing pile. Even Sickie helped, though in a more aggressive, physical fashion befitting her: she slammed her shoulder against one of the fallen water tanks and lifted it enough for Dusty to pull out the bones of the crushed pony.

She also smashed the front-most wagon with several powerful bucks, allowing Dusty and myself to retrieve several pieces of unburnt wood. We leaned those across the small pile of bones.

We sat back, waiting for Silverline. She remained still, continuing

to stare down at the skull, while tears silently rolled down her cheeks. Finally, she took a deep, shaky breath, lifting the skull and placing it atop the pile.

When she stepped back, she opened her mouth to speak. She only produced a croak before clamping her mouth shut, a small tremor passing through her. After a moment to regain her composure, she looked to Dusty. That time, she simply nodded.

Dusty stepped forward with his lighter. Soon, the kindling at the base of the pile caught, the flames quickly spreading through the funeral pyre.

Silverline sat there, watching the flames rise. Her breathing was heavy and shaky. Then her breath caught, her fragile stand of determination crumbled, and she broke down sobbing.

I scooted in closer, lifting a foreleg around her shoulder to comfort her. I was a little worried that she might pull away, but instead she turned to me, throwing her forelegs around me and burying her face in my chest and muffling her cries. I held her close, gentle and supporting.

I could sympathize with her, especially as I watched the small funeral pyre burning. It all felt so familiar. The thought brought a lump to my throat, and I had to blink back tears.

I hate to admit it, but a tiny part of me wanted to think that she had it easy. She had lost one of the ponies closest to her, and had watched her daughter suffer horrible abuse, but they were both still alive. Everyling I had known was almost certainly dead, including my queen. I had nobody to turn to, and even if any of my hive survived, I had no idea if I'd ever find them. She had her daughter and, presumably, all the other ponies back in Mareford.

But did she, really? They had been betrayed by ponies that were supposed to protect them, and it was quite possible that some of the ponies involved were still there in Mareford. Would the town be a comfort to them, or would that knowledge always be lurking in the background?

That thought clung to my mind as I held her shaking shoulders, offering what sympathy and comfort I could.



After many long minutes of sobbing and shaking, seemingly without end, Silverline pulled away. She still breathed heavily, her hooves quickly wiping away tears, but her crying had ended almost as abruptly as it had started.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice hoarse, and she took a couple more deep breaths before continuing. “We can go.”

Dusty rose to his hooves, his eyes full of concern. “You sure you’re ready?”

“Yes,” she said, giving another wipe at her eyes and a final snuffle before standing as well. “I need to get my daughter home.”

He considered her for a couple more seconds before nodding. “All right. Let’s go back to them, and we can get going.

Her pace was slow and shaky, and I caught a few more snuffles as we made our way back. Despite that, she kept on going. The only time she stopped was when we neared the bridge. It was just a couple seconds as she breathed in and out, deep and slow, her eyes closed. Then her eyes opened and she continued on, with that same sense of steady determination. She even managed a small smile as her daughter looked to her, though I had a feeling it was a far more fragile expression than she was letting on.

She helped Quicksilver to her hooves, murmuring quiet and supporting words, and soon we set out again, giving the ruins of the caravan a wide berth.



It was around noon of the next day, about halfway into our trip, when a sound softly crept over the quiet wasteland around us. It was faint, barely audible, just a soft, repetitive thumping sound. It was too soft and regular to be gunfire, but I couldn’t immediately place it. I barely even heard it, and probably wouldn’t have if I hadn’t noticed how alert Dusty had become. His ears perked up and he lifted his binoculars to scan the horizon.

I looked as well, but all I could see was barren rolling hills. The

faint sound echoed around them, indistinct enough that I couldn't tell for sure what direction it was coming from. Already, the sound was fading.

"What is it?" I asked.

Dusty lowered his binoculars, sighing. "We might have company soon."

Starlight started to bring around her Lancer, but Dusty quickly interrupted her. "Don't. Keep your weapons slung and holstered. They're not raiders or anything, but they tend to be a bit twitchy about armed ponies."

She slid her weapon back into place along her back. "And who exactly are 'they'?"

Dusty was quiet for a moment, looking as if he were debating whether he should wait for some dramatic reveal or be practical and explain things. In the end, practicality won out. "Mareford Militia. Probably the only organization worthy of being called a professional army. They're about the last ponies you want to piss off. Good news is, they tend to be pretty reasonable, and they keep travelers near Mareford safe." He glanced to Sickie. "So unless they mistake Sickie for an actual raider and try to ambush us, we're good."

"Gee," Starlight said, rolling her eyes, "I feel so much safer. How could they *ever* mistake Sickie for a raider?"

Sickie rumbled deeply, muttering. "Probably because they'll see me ripping your fucking head off if you keep that shit up."

"Ooh, scary."

Dusty snorted. "Oh, shut up, both of you. Let's at least get to town without killing each other."

Sickie and Starlight exchanged sneers, but remained silent.

We continued walking.

Almost half an hour later, I was starting to think that our "company" wasn't going to show, when a distant voice called out. "Is that Dusty Trails?"

Dusty halted, looking to our side. Beside the path, the rugged terrain rose in a ragged series of hills and ridges. Maybe a hundred yards away, if that, a pony had risen up, one hoof raised in a wave.

“Yeah, it is!” he shouted back. “Is that Bitsy?”

The distant pony’s hoof dropped. “It’s Two Bits, you jackass!” Despite the harsh language, I saw the white of teeth as he grinned, and I swear I heard a hint of laughter.

It was then that I noticed another pony, lying almost entirely concealed behind a rock. I could only see a little of his head. Most of that was obstructed by his gun, resting on a bipod, and the scope mounted atop it.

Then Two Bits looked around, calling something out and gesturing, and several more ponies appeared. They stood from the various bits of dead brush, rocks, and little ridges they had been hiding behind, revealing the multitude of weapons that had been readied against us. Soon there were a half dozen ponies following him down the slope toward us, and while they were no longer leveling their guns at us, they were still ready to be used at a moment’s notice.

As they approached, I could finally appreciate just how well-equipped they were. Their barding was just like Dusty’s, adorned with all manner of pockets and pouches, dyed a mottled sandy brown to blend in with the ground. Unlike Dusty, they also wore light helmets, painted in the same colors, and were either wearing goggles or had them pushed up on their helmet. A few even wore cloth wrapped around their faces, concealing brightly colored coats.

Their limbs were covered, too. Unlike Dusty, there was a thick bulge on the left foreleg of every one of them, with a cloth cover strapped in place. The only thing I was aware of that was of that size and worn in that location was a PipBuck, which made me immediately wary; I wasn’t entirely certain what their threshold was for declaring something hostile, and how much deceit might cross over that threshold.

A quick glance over at Dusty revealed that his garments had a similar adaptation, but without the bulk of a PipBuck beneath it. Instead, the fabric was folded in, and the covering flap wrapped around the leg to strap securely in place, simple and insignificant enough to blend in amongst the other straps and pouches.

And of course, these new ponies were armed, and not with cheap

pipe rifles. Most had rifles that looked much like the late-war Equestrian Army model, though with simpler grips and stocks. Instead of those fancy plastic stocks, of which I was only aware of due to the incredible amounts of divisive arguments they had produced, these guns had simpler metal parts. A couple ponies carried what looked to be belt-fed variants, complete with bipods, though I didn't recall the Equestrian Army ever fielding such a weapon. One pony carried a rifle like Dusty's, only with metal instead of wood for the stock and grips, and sporting a larger scope than the other rifles. Each pony had a pistol holstered at their side.

As if that wasn't enough, I saw that Two Bits actually had a *third* weapon, which took me a moment to recognize: a short-barreled, breech-loaded grenade launcher.

These ponies were armed to the teeth.

Beside me, Quicksilver pressed in against her mother's side. Silverline was eying the new ponies very warily, a fact that set me on edge.

Two Bits seemed friendly enough, at least, as he walked right up to Dusty. "Well, shit. Sergeant Dusty Trails. I didn't think I'd be seeing you again."

While Starlight looked to me with wide, questioning eyes, silently mouthing the word, "Sergeant?" Dusty just shrugged.

"Got a job that sent me this way." His gaze dropped to the other pony's gear, then back. "They made you a sergeant?"

Two Bits laughed, bringing a hoof up to his chest. "Oh, ouch! That hurts, Dusty. Are you saying I'm not good enough?"

Dusty cracked a smile, then offered a hoof. "I'm saying you were a private last I saw you. Congratulations."

"Hey, thanks," Two Bits said, grinning as he shook Dusty's hoof, though his smile turned a little sour. "Though I guess there wasn't a lot of competition for the spot. Would you believe that I'm one of the most senior soldiers in the Militia, now?"

Dusty's eyes widened slightly, glancing around at the other ponies who had gathered loosely behind Two Bits. "That's... not combat casualties, I hope?"

"Oh, no," Two Bits said, giving a laugh that died down to a nervous

chuckle. “No. Just... ponies leaving and being replaced. You, Sharps, and Plucky were just the—”

“Wait,” Starlight said, her ears shooting up. “What?”

When everypony looked to her, I articulated the question Starlight had been thinking. “Did you say Sharps?”

“Yeah,” Two Bits said, looking over us with a raised eyebrow. “Why, you know him?”

“Uh, kinda,” Starlight said, awkwardly rubbing one leg against the other.

“He was in the same caravan we were in,” I added. “The one that got wiped out by raiders.”

“Oh.”

A moment of silence followed. In the middle of it, Dusty’s eyes glanced down to my rifle, then back to meet my eyes, subtly cocking an eyebrow. I was naturally nervous about what he might do with the knowledge that I was carrying his deceased colleague’s weapon, but I also recognized that he was being very subtle in how he asked. I gave a tiny nod in answer.

“Well, shit,” Two Bits said, shaking his head. “I’m sorry to hear that.” He paused, then gave a faint, weak chuckle. “Even if he was kind of an asshole.”

“Yeah,” Dusty said, nodding along.

After another moment, Two Bits looked up again. “So, you said you’re in the area for a job?”

“Oh, yeah,” Dusty said, inclining his head toward Silverline and Quicksilver. “These two ladies hired me to escort them home.”

Two Bits glanced over at them—Silverline moved protectively in front of her daughter—then gave Dusty another questioning look. “So... what, you’re a mercenary, now?”

Dusty shrugged. “At least I get to pick my jobs.”

Two Bits blinked, then sighed, his ears drooping just a tad. “Yeah, I hear you there.”

“Anyway,” Dusty said, “I’m glad there was someone I knew on the team. Looks like you had quite the warm welcome set up there.”

“Oh!” Two Bits chuckled. “Sorry about that. We spotted that big

armored one from miles out. We just wanted to see who you guys were and what you were doing, since... well, she kinda looked like a raider.”

Sickle snorted. “And you look like a walking shitstain.”

Two Bits blinked at her, frowning for a moment before giving Dusty a flat look. “Wow. Your marefriend’s kind of a bitch.”

Dusty sighed, which, unfortunately for him, gave Sickle enough time to reply first.

“It’s ‘cause he ain’t been satisfying me in bed, lately,” she said, a cruel grin showing under her muzzle.

“Oh, shut up, Sickle!” Dusty snapped, then turned back to Two Bits. “She isn’t my marefriend. Hell, I’m not sure I’d even call her a friend at all. She’s just working with us, though I’m still not sure why.”

“Sickle, huh?” Two Bits said, looking her over with a critical eye, and I swore I caught a faint hint of color dancing in his pupils. “Charming name. If I go back to base and look into that name, I’m not going to turn up anything unsavory, am I?”

“Not out here,” Sickle said. Her grin returned. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Don’t even start that shit,” Dusty said.

“Fuck you, Dirt.”

Two Bits looked back and forth between the two of them. “Oookay. Just don’t cause any trouble while you’re in Mareford territory, or we’ll have to put a stop to it.”

Sickle sneered. “You’re going to need a bigger gun.”

“That, we can do,” Two Bits said, before looking back to Dusty. “So, hey, since you’re here, did you come through Rust or thereabouts?”

Dusty sighed, then nodded. “Yeah. You’re going out to check on the water caravan, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Two Bits said, his ears sagging again. “So something bad did happen.”

“Afraid so. Raiders hit it at the Rotwater crossing. Wrecked the caravan.” His voice lowered a bit. “Killed everypony but these two.” Two Bit’s attention immediately snapped over to Silverline and Quicksilver, but Dusty brought it back just as quickly. “And Bitsy, the mercs that were hired to guard them? They split just before the raiders showed up.”

Two Bit’s eyes went wide, his expression slack. “...You’re shit-

ting me.”

“That’s what they told me,” he said, inclining his head again. “And before you ask, their story checks out. I looked over the scene myself. The caravaners tried to put up a fight, but there was no sign of guards. They would have at least inflicted some casualties among the raiders. That, and somepony told the raider leader where and when to hit the caravan, and that there wouldn’t be any guards.”

“Shit,” Two Bits said. His gaze was distant for a moment as he thought. “And... any idea where we could find this leader?”

“He’s dead,” Dusty said. “We wiped out his whole gang.”

Sickle chuckled. “Gutrip got gutted.”

Two Bits was slowly nodding. “We need to report this. This is... troubling.” His focus returned to the group, and specifically to Silverline. “You were in the caravan?”

She nodded, though one of her hooves inched back. Her unease with the situation was clear.

“My commander would like to talk to you, then,” Two Bits said. “We can give you a lift back to Mareford. It’s a lot quicker than walking.”

She hesitated, glancing at Dusty.

“Bitsy’s a friend,” he said. “I trust him. Still, it’s your decision. You hired us, after all.”

She frowned a little. “I’m not even paying you anything.”

Dusty smiled. “Hey, we both agreed to a contract. It’s a bit late for you to be complaining about how much you’re paying for our services.”

She looked at him for a full second before giving a faint snort of amusement and a momentary smile. Finally, she looked back to Two Bits. “Thank you, but I think I’ll stay with Mister Trails.”

“You sure?”

She nodded.

“Well... okay then,” Two Bits said. He considered them for a moment before turning back to one of the ponies arrayed behind him. “Call Vulture for a pickup.” He gestured off to the left of us. “Just north of the path should be good.”

The mare he had spoken to nodded, then turned and walked off on three legs, while raising the fourth, with its cloth-covered bulge, to

her face. "Vulture, Ground."

Whatever she said next was lost behind Two Bit's voice as he spoke to Silverline again. "Come by the barracks once you're back in town. Ponies need to know what happened out here."

She nodded.

Two Bits turned to Dusty. "Was good seeing you again, Sarge. We need to get going, though. We should have been out here days ago, but they only cleared us to go searching today. We need to go check on what you said, then get word of this back home." He gave a lopsided smile. "No offense. I believe you, but you know how it goes."

"None taken, Bitsy." Dusty reached up, clapping the other pony on the shoulder. "And keep an eye out. I don't know who those mercenaries were, but if they hear somepony's digging around the caravan, they might try to do something about it."

"Banger."

Dusty blinked, having apparently misheard Two Bits' statement in the same way I did. "Pardon?"

"Banger," he repeated. "He was the leader of the merc team. Don't know if that's his whole name or a nickname or what. Thought you might want to know."

"Yeah," Dusty said, nodding. "Yeah, I do."

The sound from before had returned. The distant, barely audible sound steadily grew louder by the second, until the rhythmic, repetitive thumping was quite clear.

The source was another old-world relic, one which skimmed the top of a ridge a few hundred yards away before arcing slowly through the air. I'd rarely seen a whirligig before, and this was one of the big ones; a Griffinchaser IV or V, I think. I found myself wishing I had paid more attention to those aerial oddities. While they had been generally unimpressive compared to sky-wagons, there was something remarkable about seeing that pony-powered contraption flying through the air, like a phoenix rising from the destruction of its world.

The whirligig yawed to the side as it slowed, settling neatly into a patch of flat ground a short distance from the path. As Two Bits' team hustled toward the vehicle to join the ponies already crewing it,

he called out one last time. "See you around, Dusty! And look me up when you get to town. I'll buy you a drink!"

"I'll look forward to it!" Dusty called back, and waved.

The ponies piled into the back of the whirligig, and moments later the vehicle lifted free of the ground, its nose dipping as it accelerated away, back the way we had come.

We watched silently as the old-world contraption flew away, until Starlight finally broke the growing silence.

"Okay. Spill it."

She was staring at Dusty, who frowned. "There's nothing to spill."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Starlight said with a sarcastic roll of her eyes. "You were just part of some special military unit roaming the Wasteland with a flying machine and heavy weapons, and now you're out on your own doing small-time jobs. So come on, spill."

He sighed, turning to walk down the path, but Starlight kept right on him. "Dusty!"

"Look," he said, his jaw tense. "I just wanted to help ponies. That's why I joined the Militia. That's why I became a Ranger, like those ponies. Only it started to become less about helping ponies, and more about helping a few *specific* ponies. I didn't like where things were going, so I left."

We walked along the sparse trail, trailing behind Starlight and Dusty as the pair talked. "Okay," Starlight said, nodding. "So what happened?"

Dusty's jaw tightened a little more, but after a moment it relaxed, and he sighed. "It pretty much all comes down to Big Gun. He's always been an ambitious asshole. Him and his twisted little marefriend, Wild Runner. They got ahold of this old Ironshod factory when they were young, and Big Gun used some contacts to get the stuff he needed to get some of the equipment up and running. Long story short, Gun and Runner became the Wasteland's biggest firearm and ammunition producers.

"It's not all bad. It means the Mareford Militia has the best guns and plenty of ammunition for training. It's why we... why *they* get so good at what they do. Rangers probably fire more ammunition in a month

than most mercs do in a lifetime, and that's just training. It also brings a lot of business to Mareford. It's made the town the biggest and safest place in the Wasteland, or at least this little part of it.

"Problem is, it also means Big Gun has a lot of influence in town. He'd lean on ponies, and they'd usually do what they could to accommodate him. The problems really started when he started getting influence over the Militia."

He grumbled something, pausing to fish out a cigarette and light it. Once it was lit, he took a long, unusually deep drag.

"Normally, we'd keep settlements safe, run off raiders, that kinda thing. 'Cept then, things got weird with some of the nearby settlements. First, Stinkpit takes one of Big Gun's traders hostage, then Hayseed opens up on a Mareford caravan. Mareford Militia shows up, shuts things down, and in the end, they become more of Mareford's territory, run by ponies that won't "stab us in the back". Except, wouldn't you know it, Big Gun's suddenly getting the supplies he needs for a fraction of the cost. Stinkpit was a rotten little place, but it wasn't the raider sanctuary we were led to believe, and the ponies in Hayseed all said it was the Mareford caravan that opened up on them."

Dusty snorted. "It didn't sit well with us. There was lots of grumbling, but most ponies just went along with it. Me, I didn't like it. That shit wasn't why I'd joined up. So I resigned."

Starlight mulled that over for a minute as we walked. "You don't think the same thing is going to happen to Rust, do you?"

"Rust is pretty much the metalworking capital of the region," Dusty said. "Not to mention the best nearby source of both steel and drinking water. The water caravan runs almost constantly, and it's probably Mareford's largest single expense."

Starlight frowned. "Shit."

Dusty grunted in agreement, but added, "I'm not sure it's related, but Big Gun and Wild Runner have been involved in some shady stuff before. If they're in charge of Mareford, who knows what kind of shit they're getting into now?"

We continued on, with this new information weighing heavily on

our minds.



The rest of the trip was uneventful, save for when the whirligig flew past us in the opposite direction later that evening.

By the next afternoon, we could see the angular shapes of ancient buildings on the horizon. Those slowly drew closer throughout the rest of the day, giant skeletons of centuries-dead buildings, stretching up into the grimy sky. I found it particularly depressing, and remarkably eerie. Starlight told me it had been hit by a balefire bomb at the end of the war, but I was struck by how many buildings still stood. The balefire had left a giant crater on the other side of the city, she said, but it seemed the necromantic fire that had swept through the city had simply burned all the life from the place, rather than leveling everything.

Hundreds of thousands of ponies had likely died there, while those towers loomed over it all like giant tombstones.

The town of Mareford was set along the very southern edge of those ruins, where the devastation was less severe.

And I must say, if I hadn't been so familiar with the height of Equestria prior to its fall, Mareford would have been quite impressive. The place was big, covering quite a bit more ground than even Paradise Beach had. A tall wall ringed the town, mostly built between existing buildings, with various towers and walkways along its length. Almost all of the buildings that had once been set outside those walls had been torn down, leaving nothing more than scattered foundations. The few exceptions were the occasional farm buildings, set alongside the sparse fields.

The agricultural development was meager even compared to Appleloosa, but I found myself happy to see it. It was progress.

The farmers tending those thin fields paid us no mind as we walked along what had, at some point, turned into a "proper" dirt road. Militia guards manned the wall and lookout towers, and I saw at least one heavy weapon partially concealed within the upper levels of an old, ruined apartment building.

To my surprise, several motorwagons were waiting just outside the

gates, under those guards' watchful eyes. All of them bore the signs of the Wasteland, with rusted armor plates welded onto their frames to turn what had originally been open-top vehicles into something well-protected and enclosed. The two smaller wagons each had a roof-mounted machine gun, crewed by ponies poking up from the roof. The much larger, heavy-cargo motorwagon had similar weapons at each end, and at least half a dozen individuals—including a pair of griffons—mounted atop it, all carrying personal weapons.

There was a fourth vehicle that I wasn't sure how to classify. It looked like somepony had simply taken a particularly big motorwagon motor and affixed a large wheel at either end. It was long and narrow, and made the cloth-wrapped and goggle-wearing pony straddling the contraption look small in comparison.

I was later told it was called a motorcycle, as some sort of bizarre portmanteau of motorwagon and bicycle. Personally, it seemed immensely impractical, potentially suicidal, and likely very fast.

A few of the caravan guards eyed our approach. One of the ponies in the smaller wagons swung his machine gun over in our direction, though the barrel remained pointing up into the air. Given the excessive amounts of firepower at their disposal, and the Mareford guards nearby, they didn't have much to worry about.

"That's the Trotsen convoy," Dusty said, tipping his head their way. "Don't worry about the guns. They're very protective of their wagons, but they've always been pretty decent types."

He followed it up by giving a casual wave, and a few of the caravan guards returned the gesture. Even the one who had turned his gun toward us looked pretty relaxed, leaning back against the rim of the roof opening.

At the gate, Dusty exchanged pleasantries with another armed pony who recognized him. The other guards relaxed as the two greeted each other, and after a quick chat, we were on our way past the multi-story-tall gates and into Mareford.

Stepping through the gates, I got my first good view of the town itself. A paved road formed the main thoroughfare, surrounded by multi-story buildings. While most of the buildings were from before

the megaspells, many appeared to be newer. Additionally, while it was apparent that the buildings had been built or patched with salvaged materials, it looked like there had been some very skilled ponies working on them, ponies who knew how to make something *good*, rather than something that was simply good *enough*.

It wasn't quite as upbeat and colorful as Gemstone, but it was clean and well-maintained, and it *felt* like a pony town, even if that feeling was somewhat faint. There were still all the problems of the Wasteland out there, past the walls and out of the sight of their well-equipped guards. Inside the walls, however, were hundreds of colorful ponies living in relative comfort. Many were working or moving supplies around, some were stopping by modestly stocked shops to trade, and a few stopped in the streets to chat.

It was pleasant, and it almost brought a smile to my face.

Almost, I say, because of the suspicion that something dark lingered behind it all. It's something I was quite familiar with, well before stepping out into the Wasteland. While most of the ponies of the old Equestria were nice, friendly, loving sorts, Infiltrators became intimately familiar with the few unpleasant ponies that lurked in the background. The ponies who fed on the war and strife for their own gain. They were rare, but they were still there. I imagine the Wasteland is the sort of place where that kind of pony can thrive.

Silverline took the lead, guiding us down the road and past the various ponies moving about. The road was busy with ponies wearing packs and hauling carts, loading and unloading goods from the caravan sitting outside the gate. Most paid us no mind. A few curious looks came from ponies tending the occasional shop or passing by, though most were focused more on Sickle than Silverline and Quicksilver.

We soon turned off the main road, leaving the busy line of ponies behind. Our hooves clopped sharply on the paved street, criss-crossed with patched cracks from the years of wear. Instead of the shops and businesses that lined the main street, we passed buildings that had been converted to apartments, and even the occasional house. A few ponies were still out and about, though more relaxed than those that had been hauling goods. There was even a small field, where several younger

ponies kicked around a ball that looked to have been patched so much that I couldn't tell if there was any original material still present.

Finally, Silverline came to a halt before a group of single-story houses. She stared at one for a few moments before looking back to Dusty.

"This is my place. You, uh... you can stay here, if you'd like."

"Probably be a bit crowded with all of us," Dusty said, smiling. "We'll just hit an inn, leave you two with your privacy. Thanks for the offer, though."

"Oh, uh... I guess..."

"Is Cinder Block's Inn still running?"

Silverline blinked, then looked off in thought for a moment. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure it is."

"Ah, good," Dusty said, nodding. "Always liked him. We'll probably get a room there, if you need to get ahold of us."

She nodded, blinking a few times before speaking. "Thank you, again."

Dusty casually shrugged. "Glad to help."

Goodbyes were brief, and soon the pair were walking off towards the steps of their home. We stood back, watching them go.

It felt good, having been able to help them. Not good enough to make up for what had happened to them, but there was a sense of satisfaction, that we'd made a difference, no matter how small it might have been.

And then Sickie spoke up, with her deep, rumbling voice. "The mom'll do fine. The kid's fucked, though."

Dusty groaned. "Way to spoil the mood," he grumbled as he turned away, walking back the way we came.

Starlight leveled a glare at her. "What the hell, Sickie? Seriously?"

"What?" Sickie shot back, looking down at her. "I've seen plenty of ponies get raped 'n shit. I know how it goes. They either harden the fuck up and deal with it, or they learn to be good little victims the rest of their lives. Pretty clear which is which, and whining about it ain't going to change shit."

Starlight continued to glare as Sickie turned around to follow Dusty. "And what about you, huh?" Starlight asked. "You ever rape a pony?"

"Naw," Sickie said, without even looking back. "I was one of those *nice* raiders that never hurt anypony."

Starlight stayed put, eyes narrowed to slits as she watched Sickie walking away. She remained perfectly still and silent until I stepped up beside her, at which point she hissed between clenched teeth. "It's so damn tempting to just shoot her and be done with it."

I lifted a hoof, placing it gently on her shoulder, and the tension fled her. She turned her head, looking to me.

I couldn't think of anything useful to say. Instead, I just gave a faint, lopsided smile. "Not in town."

She snorted out a weak laugh, then sighed, and we both set out to catch up with Dusty.



Cinder Block's Inn was a big place, larger than Mustard's, and occupying a properly built reinforced concrete building rather than a crudely welded metal structure. The first floor served as a bar, and it was clear that it was a reasonably popular place, with close to twenty ponies enjoying drinks and meals. It looked like the place had been a bar before the war, and while the colors had faded from the walls, the current owner had done a good job keeping the place clean and in good repair. The air was full of talk and happiness, set to the backdrop of a static-laced and vaguely familiar tune played on an old radio at the bar.

Dusty arranged for a room for us, a large one intended for traders and other traveling groups. We made our way up, claiming our cots and unloading our supplies. Then we were heading out again.

The town hall and mayoral "mansion" were the same building, a prestigious-looking three-story building set behind a small, paved courtyard. Once we stepped into the main lobby, a young buck behind a desk looked up to us; the reflexive smile faltered as he saw Sickie, but he recovered quickly. "Welcome to town hall. Is there something I could help you with?"

"Yes," Dusty said as he approached the desk. "Is Big Gun here?"

"He's in his office. Should I let him know that you'd like to speak with him?"

“No need,” Dusty said, smiling as he passed the desk. “I’ll tell him myself.”

The young pony’s smile slipped away as we all walked right past him. “Um, but, you can’t... uh...”

His half-formed protests ended as Sickie passed close to him, her metal-clad head turning to keep her gaze locked straight on him. He backed up, almost tripping on his chair.

Dusty knew exactly where he was going. He led us up the stairs at the back of the lobby, turned, and walked up to a set of unmarked double doors. He threw them open, to the surprise of the small group of ponies beyond.

He leveled a glare at one of them as he entered. “What the hell is going on, Gun?”

The unicorn seated on a couch nearby had a hard look as he turned, shifting his balance forward as if preparing to rise and fight. Fortunately, the pistol holstered at his side remained in place. Standing beside a huge desk, a teal mare watched us enter, a smirk spreading across her face. She was also a unicorn, if a good deal older than the tan stallion, though her wiry frame looked just as fit.

The pony Dusty had addressed sat behind that desk, his face lit by the screen of a terminal. He was the oldest of the lot, probably in his fifties, and the one earth pony in the room before our intrusion. He frowned across the desk at us. “Mister Trails, isn’t it? Would you mind telling me why you’re leading a group of armed mercenaries into my office?”

“Because I want some answers,” Dusty replied, storming right up to the end of the desk to glower at the older pony. “Like why you hired a bunch of worthless mercenaries to guard the water caravan. Mercenaries that left them high and dry when the raiders showed up.”

Big Gun stared at him for several seconds before standing. The terminal’s glow winked out as he pressed a button, and he followed up by gesturing the same hoof at the stallion seated on the nearby couch. “Mister Trails, I’d like to introduce you to Fireline, leader of those ‘worthless mercenaries’, as you call them. He and I were just discussing how to uncover exactly what happened before you barged

in and interrupted us.”

Dusty didn’t even look at the other pony. “I already know what happened, Gun. You hired a bunch of mercs instead of using the Militia, and *somepony* got them to abandon those ponies—right after telling a bunch of raiders when and where to hit them.”

“So I’ve heard,” Gun replied coolly. “Though the Rangers sent to investigate weren’t able to find anything conclusive, Fireline has expressed his confidence that the squad he assigned to the caravan should have held off even a large raider band, had they still been present. Isn’t that correct?”

The unicorn stallion nodded, his expression wary as he watched us. “Yes. Six experienced soldiers, well rested after a stay in town, and equipped with the best arms and armor available. They should have been able to hold off any raider gang, or if not, inflict a crippling number of casualties upon them. It does suggest that they weren’t present at all.”

“We already know they weren’t ‘present,’” Dusty snapped, then looked to Gun again. “And why are you hiring a bunch of outsiders instead of using the Militia? You know, the ponies whose *job* it is to protect those ponies?”

“Because the Militia is stretched too thin protecting the settlements under our care. Perhaps if a significant number of their ranks hadn’t taken after certain unreliable ponies and abandoned their pledge, we could have afforded the soldiers to keep the caravan safe, but the Militia simply doesn’t have the ponies to be everywhere at once.”

Dusty bristled, pointing a hoof at him. “Don’t you even try to lay that shit on me, Gun.”

“When you come in here, accusing me of failing the very ponies you walked out on?” Big Gun scoffed, raising his nose. “These were my assets those raiders destroyed, my caps that were lost, my ponies that were killed. I know you have a low opinion of me, Mister Trails, but even you know I don’t throw away resources or ponies.”

“No,” Dusty said, eyes narrowed. “You just spend them like caps.”

The mare standing beside Big Gun’s desk, who had been silent this whole time, stepped forward. She had a cruel grin that reminded me of Sickie, though it wasn’t nearly as effective in comparison. “You better

watch what you say, 'less you want to try saying it with no *fucking teeth*."

"Now, now, Wild," Big Gun said. "No need for that."

As he was speaking, the sound of hoof-steps drew our attention back to the entrance of the room, just as four Militia soldiers entered; while their weapons were slung in easy reach across their chests, their looks were more curious and wary than aggressive.

"After all, I believe Mister Trails and his friends were just leaving," Big Gun said, his eyes still locked on Dusty's as he smiled. He spoke a little louder as he addressed the soldiers. "Sorry to disturb you fine ponies, but it seems we've concluded our business. Would you kindly see Mister Trails and his companions out?"

Dusty continued to glare for several seconds before snorting and turning away to stomp toward the door.

"Oh, and Mister Trails?"

Dusty stopped, glaring over his shoulder.

Big Gun's smile had vanished, returning to a more serious look. "You intend to continue pursuing this matter, I presume?"

"Yeah, Gun. I'm going to find whoever it was who set those raiders on a bunch of innocent ponies."

Gun considered him a moment longer before nodding. "Then wait in the lobby, and I might be able to help with that. If you're going to stick your hoof in the pot, I may as well make sure it helps us."

Dusty continued to glare for another second before giving a sharp nod and walking out. We followed after him.

He had already cooled off by the time I stepped up beside him. We walked back to the lobby in silence, flanked by the Militia soldiers.

Once we arrived there, we sat on the couches along the side wall, while the soldiers explained the situation to the pony we had brushed past earlier.

As soon as the soldiers left, Dusty called out to him. "Hey, sorry about earlier. Didn't mean to cause you any trouble."

The pony blinked. "Oh, uh... yeah." He continued casting glances our way, until Sickie bared her teeth at him. He then became entirely absorbed with the papers before him.

Eventually, Dusty's eyes drifted over to me. More specifically, to

the portable terminal strapped atop my saddlebags; while I had left the food and water supplies back in the inn room, I felt much more comfortable keeping the rare and irreplaceable old-world technology on me, even if it was a bit heavy.

“Something on your mind?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Dusty said, sitting back. He then immediately contradicted himself. “Was just wondering what interesting information we might find if we could get into that terminal of his.”

I smiled, keeping my voice low. “I could do that.”

Dusty remained quiet after that.

It was only a couple minutes before Fireline came down the stairs. He eyed us warily as he approached, finally stopping just before Dusty. “I understand you’re a mercenary?”

Dusty frowned. “Only when I like the job.”

“Good,” Fireline said with a nod. “Because Big Gun has offered a contract: ten thousand caps for the capture or death of the pony ultimately responsible for the attack on the caravan. The one condition is that I subcontract you as a... ‘reliable and morally driven’ pony independent of my own command, and split the payment fifty-fifty.”

Starlight’s eyes went wide.

Dusty didn’t visibly react at all. “And what does the job entail?”

“First, we need to track down Banger. He was the pony leading the squad. If someone bought them off, he’d be the one making the deal. As for how we do that, the first step is heading to my base. We’re set up in an old army fort east of here. Some of my ponies should know enough about Banger to know where to start looking.”

“And after that?”

Fireline looked off to the side, thinking for a moment before turning back to Dusty. “I’m not sure, yet. We can work out how to proceed once we know where to look.”

Dusty slowly nodded. “And when did you want to set out?”

“In the morning,” Fireline said. “It’s too late to make the trip. Meet me by the south gate at ten, and we’ll head out.”

Dusty mulled the offer over for several seconds before speaking. “Okay. I’ll meet you there.”

“Good,” Fireline said.

There was a silent moment of awkwardness before he turned and walked off again. With a sigh, Dusty rose to his hooves, and we followed him out.

As soon as we were on the street, and away from any other traveling ponies, Starlight stepped up next to him. “Yeah, this doesn’t seem suspicious at all.”

Dusty snorted softly. “Yeah. If Gun’s putting out a ten thousand cap reward for his own head, he’s planning something.”

“You’re sure it’s him, then?”

“Oh, yeah,” Dusty said. “There was only one question I had when I went in there, and he answered it, whether he knows it or not.”

I looked over to him. “You know him fairly well, then?”

“Well enough to know that if you accused him of slitting a pony’s throat and he gets pissed, it’s because he didn’t do it.” He looked back to me. “But if he gets smug, it’s because he knows you can’t prove it.”

I nodded. While I couldn’t be certain if his read of Gun’s reaction was correct, if it was true, I had to respect his creativity in getting there.

Starlight didn’t approve of the implications of that, however. “So this is a trap.”

“Or he’s hoping to lead us off on a wild goose chase,” Dusty said. “Maybe Fireline isn’t involved in all of this. But yeah, it’s probably a trap.”

“So we’re... not meeting up with him?”

Dusty blinked. “We?”

Starlight halted, blinking as well. “Oh, uh... well, I mean, I guess we don’t *have* to go with you, but I kinda want to figure out what’s going on around here, and I don’t *really* have anywhere else to go, so...”

A smirk played at Dusty’s lips as she trailed off, but finally, he nodded. “Well, I could certainly use some ponies to back me up. Especially since the plan right now is to go along with Fireline in the morning.”

Starlight looked thoroughly skeptical of the plan. “Uh, I was kinda hoping to follow you *not* into a trap, actually.”

“I don’t plan on walking into a trap,” Dusty said. “I’m thinking the four of us go along with Fireline, and as soon as we’re out of sight of town, we stop and have a nice long chat about him and his employer.”

“And if he’s *not* involved?”

“Hey, I said chat,” Dusty said. “Not beat or shoot or anything, just chat. If he gives us that option.”

“Yyyeah,” Starlight said. I could completely empathize with her; I didn’t like the idea of threatening or hurting an innocent.

I was still going to go along with it, of course. Being an Infiltrator means doing the occasional thing you’d rather not do, and I had come to peace with that long ago. The chances of him being uninvolved struck me as practically nonexistent.

Granted, there was the small question of *why* I was going along with the plan. It was another distraction. It didn’t get me any closer to my hive. But really, what option did I have? I didn’t buy Starlight’s excuse of having nothing better to do any more than Dusty had. After seeing Silverline and Quicksilver, she wasn’t going to just walk away from this, and I still needed her. Dusty, who was starting to have positive feelings for me, was thoroughly committed.

For better or worse, the quickest way to get back on track was to deal with this distraction as quickly and efficiently as possible. Better yet, I felt much more confident about dealing with this problem. Investigating, maybe even spying and infiltrating? That’s what I lived for.

Besides, I spent just as much time around Silverline and Quicksilver as Starlight did. While I didn’t consider myself as impulsive or emotionally driven as her, if this little distraction saw justice done for them, then I could consider it time well spent.

Oblivious to my own thoughts, Dusty replied to Starlight. “Hey, I’d love to know for sure if Fireline is involved before we get into this,” he said, “but we can’t really do that. All we know is he’s right in the middle of everything, he takes his orders from Big Gun, and it’s one of his guys that went missing. If he isn’t involved, then he’s the blindest merc captain in history.”

I took that as my cue to step in. “Actually, we might have a way to know before we meet up with him.”

Dusty shot me a questioning look, and I tilted my head back, gesturing to my portable terminal. Quietly, I said, “I can get into that terminal of his, see what sort of records he’s got. He might have something that

gives us a better picture.”

He frowned, then shook his head. “Much as I’d like to see that, you’re more likely to get yourself shot, and give Big Gun a perfect excuse to just lock us all up.”

Starlight snorted. “What, and bursting into his office didn’t?”

“Too many witnesses,” Dusty replied. “The buck out front, the Militia soldiers, they’d all see we didn’t start a fight.” He gestured to me. “But if you go breaking in, ponies know we’re together, and he can just say we conspired against him.”

I just smiled, confident in my abilities, even if I couldn’t share all of them. “Trust me, Dusty. I’ve got tricks you haven’t even seen yet. I can get in and out without anypony knowing I was there. Even if they do catch on that somepony was there, I’ll have them running in the completely wrong direction.”

He stared at me for several seconds, my confident smile versus his skeptical frown. Finally, he shook his head. “No. It’s too much of a risk for something we don’t need. We’ll find out if he’s involved tomorrow, anyway.”

My smile faded away. “Fine,” I said.

I’d just have to sneak off and do it on my own. I had no intention of going in blind.

Sickle rumbled. “Whatever. Kicking some merc ass should be fun.”

When we returned to Cinder Block’s Inn, the atmosphere had changed completely. There were still just as many ponies in there, but they were all gathered close around the bar, listening to the scratchy and staticky radio, as an energetic stallion and elegantly voiced mare spoke. All the ponies listened with rapt attention, eyes wide. Some were smiling, while others focused intently on the old radio. Even Cinder Block, the big earth pony behind the bar, had stopped to listen.

“What’s going on?” Dusty asked, approaching the group.

A few ponies quietly shushed him, remaining focused on the radio. The nearest stallion, however, turned to us, with an awed smile and tears in his eyes. He spoke in a hushed tone. “Celestia is alive!”

Suffice to say, our interest was thoroughly caught.

We joined the crowd, listening eagerly to the radio, and then to

the recap of what we had missed. There were tales of huge battles in the heartland of Equestria, and civil war among the Enclave. Of the activation of the S.P.P. towers and an event that had come to be known as “The Day of Sunshine and Rainbows”. Of warlords and heroes, hostile plants and friendly alicorns. Of a living princess-slash-goddess, a (possibly) still-living Ministry Mare, and one very significant little pony; a mare of almost mythological standing, who had been at the heart of all of this.

I sat, and listened, and slowly pieced together a little more of the world around me.

Chapter Twelve

Covert Methods

Two weeks.

That's how long it had been since the whole "Sunshine and Rainbows" event. That's also exactly how long it had been since I had woken up from my centuries-long slumber. The day I had met Starlight, and the day one of the weather-control towers had exploded upon activation. That explosion had sent debris across the countryside, including to a certain C.L.T. facility. A facility that had *coincidentally* suffered a failure of its power systems at that very moment, prompting an emergency evacuation for the one surviving being within: me.

It was a sobering thought. By everything I knew, I had survived through pure chance, and a fairly slim one at that. Had that precise chain of events not occurred, how long might I have remained in that chrysalis? Would I have ever woken up? Or would I have met the same fate as my sisters?

Mostly, I tried to ignore those thoughts. They were depressing, and at that moment, I needed to participate in the festivities.

The ponies in Cinder Block's Inn were in high spirits with the news of Celestia's survival. Sure, she was somehow bound to the S.P.P hub, however that worked, but she was alive, and those ponies were quite happy to celebrate that fact.

Myself, I was quite happy to join in, share in their happiness, and siphon off a tiny bit of the camaraderie and friendship that filled the air. I did my best to ignore how utterly strange the whole situation was. Two weeks in the Equestrian Wasteland had done wonders to further develop my ability to simply accept things I didn't understand. The whole world had gone crazy, and I had no option but to roll with it.

Starlight joined in, too, dancing to the music in a way that left much to be desired in form, but certainly wasn't lacking for energy. Dusty kicked back with a few ponies he knew, swapping stories. Even Sickles shed her armor to join in, to rather mixed results. I stayed well clear, especially as she soon had a small gathering of the rowdier ponies, as

well as an excess of alcohol and a general lack of common decency. Fortunately, she headed out with them before she got us all got kicked out.

Despite getting a fairly good meal out of the gathering, I turned in a little early. I had plans for that night, and I needed my rest.

I napped, waking only as ponies returned to our shared room. Starlight was the first, returning shortly after I had arrived. Sickle was the last, returning well after dark. Her hoof-falls came unevenly as she staggered back to her cot and collapsed with a groan. The smell hit me almost immediately, with the stench of alcohol nearly masking the musky scent lingering behind it.

She was snoring only moments later. I suppose I should mention that her snoring is much like everything else she does, excessively loud and grating, and it seemed to be made even worse for the amount of alcohol she had consumed that night.

If there was one small upside to Sickle's presence, it was that her snoring perfectly concealed what little sound I made as I slipped out of the room.



Some ponies would think that the best time to sneak into a place would be in the middle of the night.

That couldn't be further from the truth.

The best time to sneak into a place is in the middle of the day, when things are at their busiest. When ponies are coming and going constantly, and something is always going on. When they *expect* ponies, rather than their presence being unexpected. When a disguised changeling is simply one more face in the crowd, rather than the only pony around.

So while I made my move at night, I did so out of necessity, rather than desirability. Fortunately, I had one very notable advantage; unlike the ponies living in Mareford, I could fly.

I skimmed low over the roof-tops in my temporary guise: a navy-blue pegasus stallion, light and lean. I had only a small amount of gear weighing me down: my portable terminal, tucked into a bag that had previously carried our loot, the holster holding my pistol and spare

magazines, and my binoculars.

The first step of any infiltration is gathering intelligence. I already saw a little of the internal layout of the town hall, enough to know the basic layout of the first two floors. While that included my objective, I had plenty of time to scope the place out. There was no rush.

I landed atop the tallest building, an old five-story office building that appeared to be converted to stores and apartments. From there, I had a good view of the town hall building through the lenses of my binoculars.

That included the window to Big Gun's office, which was lit. Though the worn blinds were closed, I could see the occasional shadow of movement.

After a couple minutes, I decided it was time to get closer.

I stepped off the edge of the building, the wind rushing past me as I fell, and pulled out of the dive to skim low over the neighboring buildings. The last stretch was straight across the street, and then I landed atop the town hall. I peeked back over the edge; nopony was around to have seen me.

Again, I slipped over the edge of the roof, but this time my wings beat to keep my descent slow, until I hovered just beside the window. While I couldn't very well sneak in while the room was occupied, I could always eavesdrop. Though muffled through the old glass and worn blinds, I could hear Wild Runner's voice.

"...ain't selling as well as they used to. Said he's getting more and more ponies trying to haggle or scrape up more caps to get rifling, and the old ones aren't moving."

Big Gun's voice sounded quite pleased, perhaps even smug. "That would be market saturation, my dear. The old smooth-bores have become common, so ponies looking for a hoof up on their neighbor are looking towards something better. I'll pass word on to Good Deal to reduce the price for the smooth-bores, and bump up the price for rifled pipes. And I think it'll be time for Forge to put more focus on the production of proper weapons. If the trend continues, demand should be increasing soon enough."

"I'm still glad you like all this business management stuff. I think I'd

have to slit my own throat if I had to listen to Deal rambling on about margins and sales incentives.” There was a short pause, followed by a muted laugh. “Nah, I’d probably just slit *his* throat.”

“Now, now,” Big Gun said, suppressing a chuckle. “Don’t be too hard on the help. They’re hard to replace, and there are plenty of other ponies that deserve it more.”

“Yeah, I know,” Wild Runner said, her tone sharp and bitter. “Except you’re keeping me here instead of letting me deal with them. I’m *bored*. I liked it more before we had Fireline working for us.”

“This again?” A chair squeaked against the floor, followed by the faint sounds of hooves, which stopped a moment later. “There are a lot more skulls in need of cracking, my dear. I can’t expect you to cover every aspect of our growing little empire.”

“How about *any*?”

“Patience. You’ll have plenty of opportunity for fun, soon enough. As I’ve said so many times tonight, let Fireline earn his keep by disposing of this annoying little moral crusader. If you must know, I’ve got something *much* more entertaining in store for you, if you’re willing to be just a little patient.”

There was a moment of silence. When Wild Runner spoke again, there was a hint of eager amusement to her voice. “Oh, entertaining, now? Well, come on, spill it!”

“And ruin the surprise, my dear?” Big Gun chuckled. “I think not.”

“Yeah, you and your surprises. A hint, then.”

I heard Big Gun hum softly. “...No, I’m afraid not. Wouldn’t want to go spoiling your birthday present, after all.”

There was a thump and rattle, as if somepony had just bumped firmly against the desk. Wild Runner practically cooed, barely audible through the window. “Oh, a birthday present, hmm?”

“Indeed. And that’s all you’re getting out of me until then.”

A moment of silence followed, followed by a louder rattle from the desk. “Jackass,” Wild Runner said, though she nearly laughed as she did so. “This better be a damn good surprise.”

“I’m sure you’ll have more fun than I’ll want to know about.”

“Tease.” More hoofsteps. “And you better wrap up all your business

shit nice and quick. I'll be waiting for you."

A door opened and shut. There were a few more hoofsteps, then the sound of the chair squeaking again.

I took that as my cue to leave. As satisfying as it would have been to wait until he left and break into his terminal, it was no longer necessary. While I didn't have any specifics, there were a fairly limited number of ways to "dispose" of a pony.

I skimmed the roof-tops, returning to the inn.



I woke to the soft morning light, feeling remarkably relaxed and rested. The aching in my legs had slipped off into the background, and for the moment, I felt content.

The peace was eventually broken by Sickie's groan and the loud rattling of bottles clinking against each other. She muttered in barely audible and mostly incoherent fragments. "Fucking... where... dumb bottle..."

I cracked an eye open to see her leaned over the edge of her cot, fumbling at a bag with one hoof. Her eyes were thin slits, barely opened, and her ears were laid back against her skull. The side of her face was wet, probably with drool.

On my opposite side, Starlight stirred and groaned. "Ugh... what's going on now?"

"Need a drink," Sickie muttered, finally extracting a bottle from the bag and sending a few more rolling across the floor. She flopped back in her cot, sprawling out on her back in a way made especially lewd by way her coat was matted in certain places. She pried the bottle cap off with her teeth, spit it out, and proceeded to start chugging the bottle. She even managed to do it without spilling *too* much of her drink.

"And now you're getting drunk again," Starlight said, grumbling a little as she sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "And history repeats."

"Hey, fuck you," Sickie muttered as she lowered the bottle, squinting against the light. "Drinking fixes hangovers. 'Sides, I had a great fucking night, unlike you lame-asses."

"I had plenty of fun," Starlight said, stretching. "And unlike a certain *somepony*, I did it without a massive headache in the morning."

Sickle, however, had stopped paying attention. She was looking off into the distance, eyes opening a little more as she steadily blinked. Then she cracked a smile. "Hah, shit. I just made a pun. That was a pun, right? Great *fucking* night?" She broke down in snickering, which soon devolved into a groan as she laid her head back.

"Clever," Starlight dryly intoned before hopping off her cot, landing on the floor with a sharp clatter of hooves and drawing a small wince from Sickle.

"Well I thought it was funny," Sickle grumbled, though a moment later she started to smile. "Been way too fucking long since I've had a good rut." She tipped back the bottle again, draining the last of the contents, and then dropped it beside her cot. "Shit, almost makes me miss my old crew. 'Course, it took most of them to do a half decent job of it."

"Really don't need to be hearing all of this!" Starlight said, which just made Sickle snicker more.

"What, jealous?" Sickle grinned, spreading her hind legs wider. "I'm up for another round or two if you're that desperate."

I turned so I wasn't looking at Sickle any more, and started slowly gathering my things. On the far end of the room, Dusty was already up, casting the occasional disapproving look down the room as he finished reassembling his rifle. He already had his gear ready to go.

Starlight grunted. "Ugh, no." She glanced past me toward Sickle, grimaced, and looked away again. "And if you're going to keep that up, the least you could do is clean up. That's disgusting."

"See?" Sickle grunted. "You're all a bunch of lame-asses." She groaned a bit more, and from the creaking of her cot, I could tell she had sat up. "Urgh... how hard is it to find ponies that like to fuck as much as they like to fight?"

Starlight turned back to her. "Hey! I don't *like* to fight. It's just a job."

I looked back to see Sickle wincing, rubbing a hoof against an ear. "Yeah, sure you don't," she rumbled. "You just *really* like your job, huh?"

“I don’t—”

Dusty cut in. “*Children*. That’s enough. We’ve only got an hour before we’re meeting with Fireline, so why don’t you all get some breakfast before we head out. And Sickie, go clean up. Right now somepony could shoot you by scent.”

“Eat a dick,” Sickie muttered.

“Uh-huh. Better make it quick if you don’t want to miss the ‘fun’.”

While she grumbled and rubbed at her eyes, Dusty slung his freshly assembled rifle and stood to leave. It seemed the best time to speak up.

“Oh, Dusty? Just so you know, this is absolutely a trap. Big Gun intends Fireline to ‘dispose’ of us. Well, no, he specified *you*, but I’m assuming it’s a package deal.”

Dusty hesitated, giving me a questioning look. “And how, exactly, would you know that?”

I shrugged as nonchalantly as possible. “Because while you were all preoccupied last night, I sneaked out and eavesdropped on Big Gun and Wild Runner as they discussed various aspects of their business, including how to deal with us.”

He stared, eyes widening for a moment before blurting, “You *what*?”

“Also, I get the impression Wild Runner isn’t exactly the most *pleasant* of ponies.”

“Yeah, she’s not,” Dusty said, turning to face me with an angry narrowing of his eyes. “She’s the kind of pony who likes stomping in the heads of ponies she catches eavesdropping on her. What the hell were you thinking? Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I wasn’t acting impulsively or incautiously, if that’s what you’re thinking. I carefully considered every aspect of potential risk and my own abilities, and took a course of action that I was certain was safe for all of us. I could also point out that it went precisely as I expected it to.”

“This time, maybe!” Dusty shot back. “But if you keep trying to play at being a spy like in some ancient book you read, you’re going to get yourself and all of us into trouble.”

“I’m not *playing* at anything, Dusty. We all have our own skills.” I pointed a hoof at him. “You’re a soldier.” I set my hoof down again,

and gave a little smile. "I'm not."

He glared at me, mulling over my statement for several seconds before replying. "Fine. But you're also a part of a *team* right now, and that means you don't go running off to do your own thing. The fallout from anything you do is going to land on all of us, so don't you ever go cutting us all out of it again. Got it?"

"As long as you don't dismiss us out-of-hoof and give actual consideration toward our skills and expertise?" I held out a hoof. "Deal."

He had to consider it for a few more moments before taking my hoof and giving it a quick shake. "So long as your idea of your own skills match reality. Considering the risk you took for nothing, I'm not terribly impressed, so far."

My smile grew a bit more as I picked up my saddlebags, slinging them over my back. "Oh, it wasn't for nothing. In fact, I think what we've gotten out of it will be quite valuable."

"What, that this is a trap? We already knew that."

"No, we didn't. We *suspected*. *Strongly* suspected, but still only suspected." I slipped the sling of my rifle over my neck, then paused to look square at him. "What we've gotten out of it is complete freedom from any lingering concerns that we might be about to aggressively interrogate an innocent and uninvolved pony."

He frowned, eventually shaking his head. "I don't know if that's worth the risk you took. We'd find out soon enough, anyway."

"And I think everypony will be considerably more comfortable with the plan with this knowledge."

Sickle grumbled from nearby, a hoof still lying across her eyes. "I don't actually give a shit one way or the other."

"Everypony other than Sickle, then."

Dusty sighed, shaking his head again. "Fine. No point complaining about it now, since you already went and did it anyway."

"Indeed," I said, smiling again. "Now is the time for more productive things. Like breakfast."



Dusty was still a little grumpy by the time we arrived at Mareford's

south gate, passing through the thin morning crowd. The sight that met us didn't improve his mood any.

Fireline was there, sitting back against the wall. What we hadn't expected was the four armed ponies gathered around him, decked out with saddlebags and weapons. Good weapons, too, like the Militia used.

"Well, shit," Dusty grumbled under his breath as we continued to walk toward them.

Starlight leaned in. "Change of plans?"

Dusty thought on it for a moment before shaking his head and murmuring back. "Plan stays. As long as we draw first, we're good."

"I don't know," Starlight said, and I had to agree.

"Weren't you just talking about unnecessary risks?" I asked, keeping my voice low; while we were still a good ways away, we didn't want one of the occasional ponies passing by to overhear our plans to abduct one of their employed mercenaries.

Dusty shook his head slightly. "We'll be starting with Sickle in close quarters with all of them." He glanced back to her, speaking up just loud enough for her to hear. "I'll get your attention just before it all goes down, and you can lay out whichever one is closest to you. Okay?"

Sickle was, naturally, in her armor once again. I wouldn't describe her appearance at the time as "clean" so much as "cleaner", or at least cleaned up to the point where it was no longer blatantly obvious what she had been doing the night before. "Sounds fun," she rumbled, all signs of her hangover having passed some time ago. "I'll take the closest three. You cunts should be able to finish off the leftovers, right?"

"Just don't kill Fireline," Dusty said. "Don't maim him, either. In fact, I'd prefer if you didn't kill anypony at all."

"Yeah," Sickle said, snorting out a quiet chuckle. "'Cause I give two shits what you'd 'prefer'."

Starlight rolled her eyes. "Yeah, this isn't going to go wrong or anything."

"Yeah, fuck you too, runt." Sickle snickered, and added, "'Sides, we outnumber them."

"There are five of them," Starlight said, staring flatly up at Sickle. "There are only four of us."

"Yeah, but I'm worth at least three of them," Sickle replied, grinning behind her muzzle.

"That's not how outnumbering works," Starlight grumbled.

"Okay, quiet down," Dusty said. We were getting close, and the ponies we were approaching had taken note of us.

Fireline was geared up like his companions, having donned armored barding, and with an assault rifle slung across his chest. He stood as we approached.

"Good morning," he said, eying over each of us in turn. It was a calculating look, I thought. He was sizing us up.

"Good morning," Dusty said, and he even sounded moderately pleasant about it.

The furthest mercenary, a green stallion, leaned over to his nearest companion, and spoke in a hushed but clearly audible voice. "Holy shit, that's one big bitch."

Sickle focused on him like a laser. "You better watch out, shrimp. Tiny little thing like you might get stepped on."

He sneered back. "Yeah, you just—"

"That's enough," Fireline said, shooting the mercenary a harsh glare. "Save the comments for later."

It was Sickle's turn to sneer. "Yeah, listen to your boss, little bitch."

Fireline shot her the same glare, but said nothing before turning back to Dusty. "You're ready to go, then?"

"We are," Dusty said, nodding and giving a little smile. "Lead the way."

I caught a moment of hesitation from Fireline before he nodded. I don't think he liked the idea of any of us being behind him. "Okay. Let's go."

With a wave from Fireline, the gates slowly opened. Dusty took the opportunity to chamber a round and ensure his rifle was ready to go. I did the same, acting as casual as I could as I locked my rifle's bolt back.

Starlight merely smirked. Her Lancer was still slung loosely across her back, but her holstered Recharger was only a momentary thought away. ■

Fireline looked back, glancing down to our rifles before speaking. "No need to worry about that. If anything does come up, my team can

keep us safe.”

Dusty just shrugged. “Better safe than sorry.”

I did my best to seem disarming. “We wouldn’t want to be freeloaders when we can help.”

“Uh-huh,” Fireline said, frowning just a tiny bit before hiding the expression. “Just be careful where you point those things.”

Once the gates had opened enough, we set out, hooves slowly beating against the cracked pavement and dry earth.

It wasn’t the most conversational traveling group I had ever encountered. That was hardly surprising, I suppose, when both sides intended violence upon the other. If anything, it was surprising that there wasn’t *more* tension there.

On the plus side, this gave me plenty of time to evaluate the ponies we were traveling with. While Fireline led the way, the four ponies with him had fanned out, taking up the sides of our little formation. It had the simple effect of making it look like they were protecting us, while in fact surrounding us.

On the left, closest to myself, was a violet mare. She was wrapped up in thick cloth over her barding, which left very little of her visible. She was also the only one of the formation who kept her attention entirely focused outward, rather than glancing in to check on us.

In front of her, by Dusty, was a lean young buck, the only unicorn other than Fireline. His gear was clean and neat. From the hints of dirt ground into his off-white coat, I got the impression that his gear was new, rather than fastidiously maintained. He was also quite alert. Possibly too alert, with his ears constantly flicking back and forth, and he would regularly glance into the group before immediately looking outward once again.

To the right, beside Sickie, was the largest of the mercenaries, a dark-brown stallion who would have looked moderately big and strong beside anypony else in our group. He looked almost bored as he walked along. Though his gear was worn and scratched up in places, there were a few additions that caught my attention. Instead of a pistol, he had a small shotgun holstered at his side. A few bulging pouches held what looked to be drum magazines for his rifle, but he didn’t have any of

them loaded. Instead, he had a regular magazine in it, although one with a thin band of red ribbon tied around it. My immediate suspicion was that it indicated the magazine was loaded with a special kind of ammo.

Behind him was the green stallion who had spoken up earlier. Of the entire group, he was the only one who acted completely casual. He hummed to himself on occasion, and was often smiling. It wasn't a good smile, though; it was the smug kind of smile a pony gets when he knows something nopony else does.

His smile slipped a bit only minutes into our journey as he sniffed at the air. He sniffed a few more times before leaning a little closer to Sickie's flanks and sniffing again.

Sickie didn't even look back as she growled. "Unless you're about to eat me out, you better back the fuck off before you get your face broken."

He gave an amused snort as he returned to his place, wearing that smug smile once again.

Rather than heading back the way we had come to the city, our course took us east, first along Mareford's walls, under the protective eyes of the Militia guards, and then out into the crumbling suburban ruins on the outskirts of Dodge City. Few buildings still stood near Mareford, having likely been torn down for materials long ago, but the skeletal remains of the old city grew more prominent as we got further from town.

We walked down the cracked remains of a wide paved street, some old thoroughfare that had run through the ruined neighborhood. Even close to a mile away, we could still see Mareford's walls behind us, but that was soon to change. As we passed more and more buildings, we were quickly approaching the point where we would pass out of sight. That knowledge came with an acidic twinge in my gut, a hint of adrenaline at what was soon to come.

Dusty made no attempt to hide his wary glances around at the buildings we passed, eventually taking the bit of his rifle between his teeth. "How much trouble have you guys been having with the manticores, lately?"

“Not a bit,” Fireline said, glancing back. His eyes dipped down to Dusty’s rifle before adding, “Relax. We drove the last of them off last year, and we sweep through every month or two to make sure it’s still clear. Got to keep the roads safe for traders, right?”

“Right,” Dusty agreed, giving a little sigh and visibly relaxing, though he kept the bit in his mouth. “I’m glad to hear it. I never did like this stretch.”

I had to give Dusty credit. He was a decent actor at times.

The silence returned as we continued on, passing an old, burnt-out restaurant. The road curved along its front before opening into an old city square. It might have been beautiful once, but now the benches were broken, the plants withered, and the grand statue at its center was reduced to four hooves surrounded by rubble.

The curve also led us out of sight of the distant Mareford walls. That led me to look to our “escort” once more. As I was walking behind Dusty, the easiest to look at was the young unicorn beside him. That’s the only reason I caught the simple action that initiated everything.

While his rifle was slung across his chest, his horn was lit, his magic holding the weapon’s grips. With the jostling of his equipment, I would have never picked out the sound of him disengaging his safety, nor would I have seen it if I had not been looking right at it.

Dusty spoke. “Oh, hey, Sickle?”

Her head turned toward him. “What?”

Rather than answering, his head immediately turned away. His rifle swung around toward the young unicorn, and all hell broke loose.

Even expecting a confrontation, the loudness of his rifle made me jerk back. To my side, Sickle was already moving, throwing herself into the fight before I had even taken up my own weapon.

Dusty’s rifle swung around on the violet mare beside me, before I could bring mine to bear. He yelled. She moved. Another assault of sound hammered at my ears as Dusty’s rifle blared. She twisted and fell.

I staggered back, turning the other way. Fireline staggered sideways toward us, blood falling from his snout. Starlight had her repeater out, aimed in the air at nopony. The green stallion lay several yards past her, writhing and holding his blood-soaked face. The final mercenary

was mostly hidden behind Sickle's bulk; I could only see his hind-legs, jerking and twitching as Sickle turned, one of her spiked hooves rising up, dripping with blood.

I didn't notice Fireline's rifle lying on the ground, likely having fallen there at the same moment his nose had been bloodied, until his magic grabbed it again. I swung my rifle back toward him, yelling out what I had intended as a warning, but which came out as an incoherent shout of raw noise. Dusty also shouted, likely much more coherently than myself, though in the heat of the moment I missed whatever he said.

Sickle moved quicker than all of us. She reared around, smashing one hoof down on the rifle. The other, bloodied hoof caught Fireline on the top of the head, and shoved his face into the pavement. "Sit the fuck down!" she bellowed, loud enough that I remembered it clearly even over the jarring amount of adrenaline pumping through me.

The whole fight couldn't have lasted more than a couple seconds.

Starlight muttered a string of profanity as she quickly looked around, turning her Repeater toward the green stallion, who did little more than moan and curl up. I didn't get a good look at his face, between his legs obscuring it and my lack of desire to see what a buck from Sickle could do to a pony's snout. All I saw was blood.

As Sickle leaned over Fireline, chuckling, Starlight finally broke her quiet tirade of curses to look towards Dusty. "What happened to not kill—"

She was interrupted by the most terrifying sound I have ever heard.

The sound was loud and sharp, yet seemingly without end. It wasn't a single gunshot, or even the rapid cracking of automatic fire. It was less a string of distinct sounds and more of a *tone*, a horrible, tremendous sound that tore through the air just as a hundred bullets tore into the area around Sickle, throwing up sprays of dirt, shattered pavement, and blood.

Sickle fell.

I scrambled back, unable to hear whatever I saw Dusty shouting. He, Starlight, and myself threw ourselves to the ground beside the wall of the old restaurant. Old, long-vacant windows gave a good view over

the street, but we huddled behind the low brick wall beneath them, taking what protection we could get.

The *tone* paused for a split second, echoing in the distance, and then resumed, louder and angrier, as the tide of bullets tore into the wall we hid behind. Bricks shattered and fell, peppering us in fragments and filling the air with dust. I could have been screaming and not have even known.

Dusty shoved me forward, and I crawled frantically in the direction he had pushed me, too terrified to do anything but follow his direction.

A quick glance back caught sight of Sickie scrambling to her hooves and lurching in our direction. Her armor, ever impressive, had saved her life from the terrible assault. The same could not be said of Fireline or that smug green stallion, both of which were quite clearly deceased.

I made it to the rear of the restaurant, past the edge of the windows and to the relative safety of having most of a building between us and the source of that tremendous fusillade of fire. The sound tore through the air again as another volley ripped up the edge of the restaurant and smashed into the side of Sickie's armor. Cans of food poured from one of the shredded bags on her back as the assault sent her stumbling and falling; this time, however, she fell behind the partially destroyed wall, giving her a little relief from the fire.

The bullets still struck out, but most now hit the wall, with relatively few puffs of bullets shattering on the plates of her armor as she scrambled forward again, and moments later she made it to us. The terrifying gunfire stopped.

I can't overstate just how relieved I felt when Sickie made it to us. While I certainly had my reasons to dislike her, this was precisely the sort of situation where having a heavily armored and psychotically vicious killer at my side was likely a *good* thing.

That, and I was burdened with the concern that, if someone or something were able to take down a mare like Sickie, what chance would I have?

That relief was diminished a moment later when Sickie staggered and nearly fell. Her head weaved from side to side, as if she were about to collapse. It was only then that I noticed the blood streaming from

her. It was practically pouring from behind the plates over her right shoulder and side, as well as dribbling from her chin. Behind the thick bars of her muzzle, all I could see was blood and teeth.

Dusty was up beside us, his words finally registering with me. "Next building! Move!"

He rammed his shoulder against Sickle's as she teetered, and she leaned against him without protest, while I looked in the way Dusty had indicated. Across the small back lot was a two-story building of some sort, likely a store. I hesitated, looking to my right, but the line of old buildings looked to give good cover from whoever had been shooting at us.

I obediently rushed forward, leaping through a vacant window. Safely in cover, I sat, trying to catch my breath. My heart hammered hard in my ears, beating away everything else.

Starlight arrived moments after me, followed several seconds later by Sickle and Dusty. Sickle shoved her way awkwardly through the nearby doorway, then collapsed. She uttered a few barely recognizable curse words as she awkwardly fumbled with her armored saddlebags.

Despite the unexpected chaos, Dusty took charge of the situation. "Whisper! Cover that way!" He pointed a hoof further down the back lot we had crossed, while aiming his own rifle out the window the way we had come. "Starlight! Help Sickle! Get a couple healing potions in her as quick as you can. We need to move fast."

Starlight drew back from the window and moved further into the room, while I crouched by the doorway. I resisted the urge to look back and check on her, keeping my eye down the sight of my rifle. I ignored the clattering and rustling behind me as seconds sped by. I focused on the corner of the far building, where an alley led back into the lot, ready to pull the trigger the moment a head poked out.

I almost squeezed off a shot by accident when Dusty fired off a burst, the sound hammering at my head and kicking up dust in the confined space. He immediately followed up by shouting, "Fall back, now!"

I didn't need any more encouragement, turning and running back into the building. I passed Starlight and Sickle, who was climbing awkwardly to her hooves.

“She’s hurt bad,” Starlight said as Dusty entered the room.

“I’m fine,” Sickie growled, her words slurred as she staggered forward.

Dusty pulled his snout out of a pouch, a mine clutched between his teeth. “Keep moving!” he said as he armed it, and tossed the device to the rubble-strewn floor behind us. I put on a bit more speed, running outside.

It was maybe ten yards to the next building, and every inch of it left me terrified that I was about to be shot by some unseen assailant.

One corner of the building had collapsed, and Dusty and I once again took covering positions over the remains of a wall, while Sickie collapsed onto the rubble-strewn floor behind us.

As soon as she had, Dusty spoke again. “Sickie, take whatever you need to get moving again.”

She grunted, and I heard the clatter of her armor and metal cases, followed by a couple loud, angry, pained growls. Those sounds continued in turns, second by second, while I focused on the corner of the building we had come from.

A powerful, almost impossibly deep *bang* shook the air, as a wave of dust and smoke burst from every opening of the building we had just vacated.

Dusty chanced a glance back before speaking to me. “Whisper, peel back to the next building, then set up to cover for everypony else.”

“Got it,” I blurted, spinning to run back. I caught only a quick glimpse of Sickie—her metal muzzle hung open, giving me a quick glimpse of her mangled snout—before I was past them, moving as quick as I could across the rubble, uneven terrain. Then I darted out the doorway on the far side of the building, and out into the alley beyond.

The next building had no windows facing our direction, but halfway down the side wall was a recessed doorway. I took position there, aiming back past the building I had just emerged from, and casting wary glances toward the windows and alleyway looming beside me.

I crouched there, waiting in silence with nopony around. After the tremendous, frantic madness, the quiet was unnerving.

I'm quite glad that, despite the humming tone that had returned to my ears, I heard Sickle's armored hooves as she approached. With how tense I was, I can't be certain I wouldn't have accidentally shot her if she just appeared around the corner.

She lumbered by, with Starlight tagging along beside her. Starlight gave me a quick, concerned glance before passing by me. Her Lancer was out, floating just beside her head, ready to shoot.

The sound of their hooves rapidly faded behind me as I waited, covering their retreat.

Dusty's rifle fired again, the sound loud and distinct. There was a long burst of automatic fire, followed by several shorter bursts before the weapon went silent. I heard no return fire.

Several seconds later, Dusty came running around the corner. He slowed as he came along beside me. "Wait ten seconds, then bound past me."

With that, he was gone again, hurrying down the alley in the same direction Sickle and Starlight had gone. I understood his intent, then. We would move alternately, one covering while the other fell back.

And at that moment, I was the one in front. It was my turn to lay down a wall of fire against those who pursued us. Adrenaline built with every moment, as the seemingly inevitable clash drew closer. I counted down the seconds, hoping that my allotted time would expire without the arrival of any hostile ponies.

It was with a wave of relief that I finally reached "ten". I turned, hooves shifting to gallop away.

The first sighting of the ponies pursuing us came not from the corner I had been covering, but the alley leading off to my side. A pony—the instant was too quick to pick out any details of their appearance—galloped around the corner of the neighboring building and toward me. A weight dropped in my gut; that pony had run around to catch us in the flank, and the path of my retreat lay open and exposed to him.

Instead, I continued my turn, lunged forward through the doorway I had stood in, and threw myself to the side. I landed hard on the rubble-strewn floor at the same instant gunfire erupted behind me, throwing shards of plaster and brick from the wall behind me.

I immediately scrambled to my hooves and down the dark passage I found myself in. I managed to keep my footing despite the cluttered bits of fallen plaster, rushing past doorways that led even further from my companions. The dark hallway turned one way, then the other, and finally opened into an old storage room. Shelves lay askew, and shards of broken crates lay scattered about. I rushed through the room, leaping over a fallen shelf. I was so consumed with my frantic escape that I hadn't even consider the possibility of nails among those broken remains, and likely escaped that hazard through pure chance.

I burst through the door on the far side of the room and into a completely looted store, and the much-welcome sight of muted sunlight. Unfortunately, the same floor-to-ceiling windows that brought in the sunlight also brought the much less-welcomed sight of three heavily armed ponies galloping down the street, one of whom was already looking in my direction.

I threw myself behind the counter, keeping low as I ran along it. Gunfire erupted once again, throwing more clouds of pulverized plaster into the air as bullets tore into the wall behind me—and to my horror, blasted shards of wood from the counter that stood between me and the shooter, as the bullets tore straight through the flimsy barrier. The only protection it offered was to obscure my position, but enough bullets would eventually find their mark.

I rushed forward as more bullets punched more holes, and leaped through the window at the far end. I landed in the small gap between that building and the next, and leaped again, diving through the much smaller window facing me.

It was another hall. The gunfire died off behind me as I galloped in the growing darkness of the building. I passed by the closed doors, unwilling to take the time to open them, and the hall quickly ended in a set of stairs. I bounded up them, finding myself in another hall. I could already hear the hoofsteps and shouts behind me.

Thinking of Dusty's earlier tactics, I stopped at the top of the stairs, turned, and fired a short burst down the way I had come. Then I was running again. I knew I wasn't going to hit any of my pursuers with the random shots, but it might give them a moment of pause, and right

then, every second was precious.

I galloped down the hall, catching bits of light where the crumbling building let in the sun. A pile of debris from a collapsed section of ceiling forced me to run through an open doorway. The room beyond, originally an apartment, was strewn with ruined furniture, and I leaped over a sagging couch before rushing through the back door and into a bedroom.

The building had suffered a fire at some point in the past, leaving the bed a gutted mess of springs and the floor and walls blackened, but its misfortune turned into my good fortune; the wall of the bedroom had burnt badly enough to partially collapse, and I leaped through the gap into the adjacent room.

I passed through room after room, weaving back into the hall, slipping through fallen sections of wall, or leaping through narrow holes. The burnt floor crunched under-hoof, and at one point I had to shoulder my way through the remains of a wall, the old, charred wood practically falling apart and smearing me in black dust.

The building ended abruptly, the outer wall having collapsed to open up into the narrow alleyway. The building across the way had also been burnt away, its upper story almost entirely opened up. The gap couldn't have been even ten feet across; an easy jump. I didn't hesitate, galloping on and leaping the gap.

I really shouldn't have been surprised to discover that the fire had weakened the building. In my defense, I had much more pressing matters at hoof than the state of the building I was fleeing through—or at least, I did until the floor I landed on smashed in under hoof. The entire floor caved in under my sudden weight, and I fell.

I immediately called up my magic. There wasn't any time for fancy magics or calculated transformations. I simply stripped away my disguise, my wings buzzing. Then I slammed into the ground, my poor and tired legs collapsing as I tumbled. I came to a halt when I smashed into something hard. My right shoulder bore the brunt of the impact, sending a shock of pain through me, but I was intact. Between the bit of deceleration I had managed and the protection of my carapace, I seemed mostly unharmed, sore shoulder aside.

I quickly shoved myself up, appraising the situation. The object I had run into was a counter, and the broken remains of tables and stools littered the room. It had been a restaurant, it seemed, or perhaps a tavern. Though partially blocked by rubble, the windows gave me a good view of the street outside. Two doors on opposite sides of the room led deeper into the building.

I heard Dusty's rifle, three rapid shots echoing around the buildings. It sounded so distant.

Unfortunately, my unexpected trip downstairs had cost me time. My lead was shrinking, and though my shoulder only felt sore, I feared it might slow me down. I could hear the hoof-beats of ponies drawing closer.

It was time to change tactics.

The front door of the restaurant smashed open as a well-armed stallion rushed in, but he didn't find a changeling, or even a gray-coated, silver-maned mare. Instead, he found an off-white unicorn buck.

I was already calling out before the stallion had taken in the scene. "The back door!" I wheezed, holding my right foreleg tight against my chest as I leaned against the counter, and waved the other in the direction of the back door. "She went out the back door!"

He took one look at the apparently wounded pony, then rushed off in the direction I had indicated. I remained where I was, wheezing and panting. More ponies ran by, most on the street, with only a couple more following through the building. They paid me no more than a passing glance, too caught up in the moment to question the young unicorn's survival. I'm not even sure if they recognized him, specifically, or if they had accepted my apparent help as proof that I was on their side.

I waited only about ten seconds before hauling myself up to my hooves and limping over to the window. There's an important lesson in deception and consistency, there; if you're going to fake something, keep faking it, even when you think you won't be observed. It not only prevents you from being discovered by accident, but it's a good way to keep yourself "in character".

While I still heard hooves clattering on the cracked street and through broken buildings, they were all heading away. I had time

to think and plan. Unfortunately, I wasn't terribly happy with my situation.

I had escaped the immediate threat, but it left me in a troublesome position. While disguising myself as one of the mercenaries might give me a degree of freedom among them, it would also lead to my own companions mistaking me for an enemy. While I could move past the mercenaries with relatively little difficulty, it would do me no good if I were then shot by the very ponies I was trying to reach. It would also do me little good if all these mercenaries killed my companions anyway. While I had every respect for their fighting ability, they were three ponies against many, and I had no doubt that these ponies would be of higher skill than the raiders we had faced before.

So I was faced with a problem, and I needed to figure out a solution, quickly.

As always, the first step was information.

Peering out the windows, I looked around the buildings nearby. It wasn't hard to find what I was looking for; all I had to do was look up and see what building rose the highest. The answer was an old bell tower atop a building just half a block away. I stepped out, heading there in a limping trot.

A couple more ponies were trotting down the street past me, but after a quick glance, ignored me, and I stepped into what I assumed had once been a government building. Despite the many offices and decaying decor, it wasn't hard to find the stairs to the bell tower.

The bell was long gone, and the tower's roof was likely one good gust from finally collapsing, but it served my purposes perfectly. While only slightly taller than some of the other buildings around it, it gave me a clear vantage of what lay ahead.

I raised my binoculars with my magic, keeping myself barely exposed. Starlight was out there somewhere, with her powerful and long-ranged weapon, and I had no desire for her to mistake me for one of the ponies attacking us.

And there were a lot of them. I could see almost a dozen moving down streets and through buildings, and by the rising sound of gunfire, there were many more of them. Past the gunfire, I could hear the

occasional crack of Dusty's rifle, and even more occasionally, the sharp pop of Starlight's Lancer tearing the air apart in its wake. It made them easy to locate, though my hopes dwindled when I had; their retreat had led them down a long line of buildings, eventually ending in an old skywagon charging station a few hundred yards away. Ponies were taking up positions in several buildings across the street from it, and the paved lot behind the station offered no cover. Dusty's fighting retreat had gone as far as it could.

I was taking in the scene when I heard hooves on the stairs below me. I suppressed the urge to run and hide—especially since my only escape would be onto the slanted roof beside the tower—and remained where I was, exactly as if I was supposed to be there.

I was still looking out the binoculars, and doing my best to keep my breathing in check, when the pony arrived. She was a blue earth pony, with light barding, a brown cloak draped across her back, and a long rifle held in her teeth. She dropped into a crouch beside the wall, swinging her rifle up to rest it across the edge. "Hey," she said, glancing my way. "You see where they're at?"

"Yeah, you can see them perfectly from here" I said, lowering the binoculars and raising a hoof to point. She raised her rifle, peering down the scope. "See that street one over? Follow it up to the intersection and you'll see a service station. They're in there. Watch the left—"

The sharp *clack* of my pistol echoed within the confined space, and the mare collapsed, her head smacking against the wall as she fell.

"—window," I finished, lowering myself beside her. Aside from the faint thump of her fall and the huff of air leaving her body, the only other sound was the faint pinging of the casing clattering on the roof.

In the back of my mind, I noted that this was the first pony I knew I had killed. It's possible I had killed one before, with the copious amounts of ammunition I had spent in our previous engagements, but I honestly doubted it. In any case, this was the first one I could be sure of.

I don't note that because of any particularly strong feelings on the matter. There wasn't any internal debate over the morality of having done so. At best, these were soldiers employed to pursue goals that

ran contrary to those of myself and, as its only known agent, my hive. At worst, they were knowing accessories to rape and murder. I felt no particular remorse for killing her.

It simply felt like something noteworthy, significant only as something new. A milestone, in a way.

It was a first for me. The first of what I expected would soon be many.

I floated her rifle over to my side, removed her cloak, and rolled her onto her back. It took a surprising amount of effort. Though she naturally didn't resist, it's easy to forget just how heavy a pony can be, and how awkward a limp body can be. Once I had her on her back, I took a few moments to examine her, quickly taking in the details of her appearance. She was lean, with a thin frame and fine features, but reasonably fit. No visible injuries, aside from the obvious, nor any notable blemishes. She had a very short blue-green mane and a short tail, both straight and simple. Lifting the flanks of her light barding revealed her cutie mark to be a single bullet, long and narrow.

Nodding in satisfaction, I called up my magic, and in a flash, mimicked her appearance.

Next I opened her small bags, dumping out the contents. Food and water were pushed aside, while a single healing potion and a ragged first-aid kit were quickly tucked into my own bags. The only item I examined was a small notepad, but it disappointed me; she wasn't so thoughtful as to have written her own name in it, and I had no time to pore through it. It, too, was added to my bags.

I did notice a word etched into the stock of her rifle, however. "Thunder". I had no idea whether it was her name, or one she had given the rifle, but I remembered it in case anypony addressed me by it.

As for the rifle itself, it was a long, bolt-action weapon, with a large scope. It was of wartime make, worn by the years, but well cared for. The pouch resting across the mare's chest contained a few dozen rounds for it, looking very much like the kind of round Dusty's rifle used. I took that, as well.

With my quick check complete, I swept the cloak over my back, and returned to the edge of the bell tower. I lifted the binoculars, sweeping

around the area again. The shooting was slow but steady, and I could see several puffs of bullet impacts from the walls of the service station. Fortunately, the structure had been built along practical, industrial lines rather than for aesthetics; the building was thick and blocky, and even the centuries of wear hadn't worn down its concrete walls. Even if they had been forced to a dead end, Dusty had led them to what was possibly the most fortified building in the area.

The front of the service station was a wide but short window, like a long slit in the concrete wall. Deep within it, I saw a subtle flash. A second later I heard the sound of Dusty's rifle echoing across the ruined buildings. Dozens of gunshots answered, peppering the area, but thankfully, none of the mercenaries were trying to move up.

That made sense to me. They had their targets trapped. Why risk moving in when they could simply pepper them at range? I just hoped they wouldn't tire of the situation before I did something about it.

Not that I had any clue what that would be.

It looked like the mercenaries had taken position within three buildings. On the right was a long, narrow motel, two stories tall, of which the back half had long ago collapsed. To the left was what looked to be a small grocery store. Directly across from the service station was a convenience store, its colorful post-topping sign—"Shop 'n Dash"—having long ago faded and fallen across the street beside it.

I could see several ponies in them, peeking out of windows or moving around, far more concerned with staying in cover from the ponies to their front than some unseen changeling behind them.

How convenient of this mare to have given me what appeared to be a long-range, high-accuracy rifle.

If only I were a decent enough of a shot to make good use of it. No, I needed another approach.

I continued scanning before something caught my eye. A pony, one of the mercenaries, was hauling a wagon up the street behind the motel. There were a few boxes and a barrel, but also several ammo containers and a few weapons, including a heavy machine gun. There was even a small basket full of grenades.

It seemed like a good place to start.

I drew back, slinging the scoped rifle across my back, while my own rested against my chest. I hurried down the stairs, past the long-abandoned offices, and out the back door of the building to canter after him and that wagon. I took care to always keep something solid between myself and the service station.

By the time I had caught up with the wagon, it was parked by the fence behind the motel. The pony who had been hauling it, a large stallion with a holstered pistol and a shotgun at his side, was pulling the heavy machine gun from the wagon, and grunting under the effort. I trotted up to him, imitating the blue mare's tone. "Hey, you need any help?"

"I got this," he grunted as he hauled the tripod-mounted weapon across his back, and took a step toward the edge of the fence. "You can grab some ammo for it, though."

"Sure thing," I said, walking behind him to get to the wagon.

Rather than getting the ammo, I used the opportunity to grab the bit of my pistol in my teeth, draw it, and bring it around on him.

For whatever reason, he started to glance back just as I fired. The shot caught him off-center at the back of his head, and he toppled over. The gun fell to the ground with a metal-on-concrete crack, and he rolled onto his back, groaning something made incoherent by the likely mortal, but not immediately fatal wound.

I had much more time to line up my second shot. His head fell back against the street, his body jerking, and then he slumped onto his side, dead.

I holstered my pistol again, clambered up into the wagon, and started rooting through their supplies.

I was not disappointed.

Amidst the food, water, medical supplies, and miscellaneous equipment, there were ammo cases containing hundreds of rounds of several different types, a good number of grenades, a few spare pipe rifles, and one case that particularly excited me. Inside were the sort of thing that could make a destruction-minded changeling weep for joy: a pair of large demolition charges, old Equestrian Army models complete with blasting caps and a radio detonator.

And to think, I had once considered my short course on demolitions and improvised explosives to be completely useless. Contingency planning wins again.

I wasted no time in making use of them. The radio detonator was a simple model, and I soon had each charge prepped, ready to go. I switched the detonator to “Arm”, and a small red light appeared. After that, it was a simple matter of getting them to where they would do the most good.

They were much too heavy to haul both at once. I turned the detonator back to “Safe” and engaged the physical safety, then tucked it into my bags. After that, I pulled out one of the demolition charges, closing the case over the other. I hauled my chosen charge around, swinging it onto my back. I grunted a little at the weight; it must have been about fifty pounds.

I carried it to the edge of the fence and peered around. I could see the roof of the service station, and while the yard and murky swimming pool behind the crumbling motel were wide open, the burnt-out husk of a skywagon provided enough concealment to get to the ruined building.

The gunfire had faded to background noise, a slow but steady cacophony. As I rushed toward the rear of the motel, crouched low, the nearby gunshots came to the forefront of my attention. They were coming from the front of the building, naturally, and I quickly picked my way through the rubble toward them.

I heard another shot from Dusty. They were so close, but the difference in the volume of fire was concerning. I had no idea how much longer his ammo would last.

Only the last three rooms of the ground floor were still standing, and the partially collapsed roof had rendered all but the last room upstairs impassable. I climbed over the mountain of debris until I could enter the back of what still stood, making my way steadily toward the nearby sounds of gunfire.

I crawled through a half-collapsed wall, into a debris-strewn bathroom, and then into a bedroom. The door between units had been battered down at some point. I peeked through it, finding myself right

next to a closet, while a pony at the far end of the room crouched behind a couch, his rifle aiming out the window.

The pop of Starlight's Lancer firing echoed across the street, and the pony across from me started firing again, putting a half-dozen rounds downrange. More guns blazed nearby, both in a neighboring room and from the floor above.

I took advantage of the noise to set the demolition charge inside the open closet and back out.

The canter back to the wagon was much easier without the extra weight. I hopped over the dead pony and retrieved the final charge, returning to the edge of the fence.

The convenience store was much more open. While there was still the occasional bit of broken skywagon or wall that had not yet fallen, there were enough gaps to make the prospect of crossing the distance twice look very unappealing. From there to the neighboring grocery store was much easier.

I decided I wouldn't be returning to the wagon after that, so I set the charge down and loaded as many of the grenades as I could into my ammo pouch. Then I retrieved the explosive, took a deep breath, and galloped to the first piece of cover.

I practically slammed against the hulk of the skywagon as I arrived. I paused there for only a moment, taking another couple deep breaths before darting forward again to a low wall. Then a toppled dumpster, filled with debris. I was making the short gallop between the dumpster and an old delivery wagon when a terrifyingly loud *snap* nearly sent me stumbling. I threw myself to the ground behind it as the hail of return fire answered Dusty's shot.

I quickly got to my hooves, taking advantage of the return fire to run the final gap, finding myself in the strange position of hoping their fire kept Dusty's head down for just that moment.

The convenience store was small. I slipped in the back door, entering a tiny office that led into the store itself. Several ponies were in the front area, taking cover behind the edge of the window and the counter. One lay dead beside the front door, and another was nursing a bleeding leg.

One of the ponies noticed the movement and looked my way. He saw me, then immediately turned back to the window. After all, that's where the danger was.

I set the demo charge against the front wall of the office, closest to them, and slipped out the back.

There was only one building left, and I was out of bombs.

I galloped across the narrow gap into the grocery store's back lot, coming to a halt once I was in safety once again. The lot itself was cluttered with debris, broken crates, and old equipment. To my surprise, I wasn't alone. A single pony crouched at the back of the lot, behind a refrigerator. Unlike the others, he was facing away from the service station, scanning over the buildings everypony had just come through.

A quick glance around confirmed that we were alone, so I moved toward him.

"Hey," I called out as I neared. "How come you're out here?"

He glanced my way, then looked out again. "Covering our asses. That gray mare got away, so Storm's got me watching our rear in case she shows up."

"So they stuck you out here all on your own?"

"Yeah," he replied, a hint of bitterness to his tone. "Not that I don't mind *not* being shot at, but I'd rather be up front with—"

I recognized a certain measure of irony as my bullet smashed through the back of his skull. The sharp *clack* of my pistol echoed faintly across the lot, almost certainly inaudible past the occasional gunshots from within the building. He fell against the fridge and slid down into an awkward heap on the ground.

Pausing behind an old food crate, I retrieved the detonator, arming it once more. I didn't trigger it just yet, though. Instead, I hung it on the strap of my ammo pouch, close to hoof in case I could make use of such a dramatic distraction.

The back door of the store lay fallen on the ground, giving me access to the storage room at its rear. I picked my way through the room to the door leading into the store, and peeked in.

Rows of battered shelves left most of the store hidden to me, though the scattered gunshots from the front told me there were plenty of

ponies there. I could only see two of the occupants, both sitting behind a battered freezer cabinet at the rear of an aisle. One was a large mare, who wore no barding, but made up for it with her weapon; she wore a battle saddle sporting a minigun, with a chute leading to a large ammo drum opposite it.

Surprisingly, it was the other mare that caught my attention. She wasn't like the other mercenaries I had seen. She looked like a member of the Mareford Militia. My eyes immediately dropped to her foreleg, spotting the cloth-covered bulge of a PipBuck, and the adrenaline mounted once more. I had no doubts that fancy little arcana-tech device would consider me to be hostile, destroying any benefit my disguise could provide.

I considered my options for a few seconds, then began to pull out all the grenades I had acquired, setting them all on the floor beside the door. As I did so, the ponies outside continued talking.

"Because ammo's expensive. It ain't like we're on a time crunch, here."

"Some civilians might investigate the gunfire. We're not supposed to arrive until after the fight's over."

"So you arrived when it's still going on, big deal. I'm sure Shard knows what she's doing."

"After seeing your ambush, I'm not so certain of that."

The other mare snorted. "Hey, no pony expected them to just stomp in Fireline's head and kill his team. None of this shit makes any sense."

I missed whatever came next. I had taken a grenade with each hoof, pulled their pins with my teeth—which is not nearly as easy as you might think—and after a quick glance around the edge of the doorway, threw one, then the other. As soon as the second one had left my hoof, I threw myself down against the wall, flipped the safety on the detonator, and smashed my hoof against the trigger.

It was as if I'd been bucked in the chest.

The explosion transcended sound, a terrible, angry wall of presence that smashed into me, even behind the intervening bulk of the building. The world felt disjointed afterwards, almost as if I couldn't tell which way was up or down, and dust filled the air with a dense haze. I never

even heard the grenades go off. It was a few seconds before I could pick myself up, detangle myself from my cloak, and look through the doorway again.

The two ponies I had spied upon lay motionless in the smoke and haze. The entire far wall of the store, closest to the convenience store and its bomb, had collapsed, a whole section of the roof coming down with it and giving a view of the sky. Dust choked the air, billowing away from the collapsed area. Past the dust and broken shelves, I could see a few more ponies inside the front of the grocery store, moving away from the destruction.

One by one, I picked up a grenade, pulled its pin, and threw it across the store. I could feel every explosion, though the sharp bangs felt somewhat muted and muffled after the tremendous detonation that had preceded them.

When the last grenade was thrown, I rushed over to the two dead ponies. Green fire erupted from my forehead as I added a horn to my disguise, then used my magic to quickly unbuckle the minigun-equipped battle saddle.

I think my reasoning at the time had been that anything which had survived two demolition charges and a dozen grenades would need something truly excessive to put down.

I had just pulled the battle saddle free when a dust-caked stallion came staggering out of one of the aisles, barely twenty feet away.

Maybe I could have bluffed my way further on. Maybe he would have missed that one of the many ponies there had grown a horn, especially with how dazed he looked. Maybe I could have talked my way into a better position and silently removed a few more ponies before things turned loud.

But the adrenaline was flowing strong, and I had a minigun. I swung the battle saddle around, shoved my shoulder against the back of the frame to brace it, and squeezed my magic around the bit.

The sound that had been so terrifying to be on the receiving end of was so amazingly empowering from the other side of the weapon. The battle saddle jerked and bucked back against me as the minigun roared, tearing into everything before it.

I didn't aim so much as point it in the general direction and set it loose to do its own thing. I let off the trigger just a second after squeezing it. Amidst the dust that the minigun had kicked up, I could see the motionless form of the stallion, his side shredded by a dozen bullet wounds.

Sharp cracks of gunfire tore through the air, striking shelves in front of me. I dove back behind the freezer cabinet; someone in the front of the store was firing blindly through the shelves in my direction. I brought the battle saddle around, and answered with a much bigger gun. A single second of fire put out a tremendous volume of fire, shredding the vacant display before me. A couple aisles' shelves finally gave in and collapsed

I let off the trigger, bringing the bucking battle saddle back into control just as a grenade bounced off the remains of the next aisle's shelves and onto the ground.

I skittered around the cabinet and galloped down the aisle. I was halfway down it when the grenade went off, well behind me.

The adrenaline had taken complete control by then. I rushed forward, intending to get to the end of the aisle, turn the corner, and hose down any remaining mercenaries.

Instead, I got to the corner at the same moment another pony did. We were only feet apart, too close for me to bring my stolen weapon to bear, or for him to aim the assault rifle he held in his teeth.

Lacking any better options, and with the fury of adrenaline pumping through me, I dropped my shoulder and rammed him.

It went about as well as you'd expect.

My disguised form was light and lean, and though he staggered with the impact, he quickly looped a foreleg around me, twisted, and slammed me down atop a section of fallen roof.

I remember having just enough time to be surprised at suddenly looking at clouds before his weight landed atop me; I had just managed to catch my hoof in the sling of his rifle and pull him down with me. He responded with a swift hoof to the side, knocking the wind out of me. When that didn't get his rifle free, he lowered his head to his chest, drawing back a moment later with a knife clutched in his teeth.

I threw my hooves up at his chest, halting his attack for only a moment. He immediately swiped with a hoof, shoving one of my much weaker legs away, then moved to do the same with the next. The knife loomed above me.

Fortunately, I had two things going for me. One: I'm a changeling. And two: fire tends to provoke very visceral reactions.

Green fire flashed over me as I tore away my disguise, and the stallion flinched back from my sudden and unexpected immolation. It delayed my imminent stabbing by only a moment, but that was all I needed as I snapped my head forward, firing a blast of magic from my horn that sent him stumbling and falling backwards. As he fell, I grabbed my rifle in my magic and emptied the magazine at him. At least one round hit, as he didn't get up again.

I scrambled up to my hooves, grabbing the fallen battle saddle with my magic once more. I saw then that several ponies lay scattered along the front wall of the store, twisted and limp in death. At least two wore Mareford Militia barding. The store itself, already decayed through the centuries of neglect, had been devastated by my assault. Shelves lay twisted and crumpled in the aisles, and the ceiling was drooping and crumbling, as if it might give in and collapse at any moment. It was hard to believe that anything had survived.

Another pony stepped out around the counter at the end of the next aisle. He looked at me in wide-eyed horror, though whether it was my insectoid appearance or the minigun held in the green fire of my magic, I could only guess. I brought the battle saddle around, and he dove back behind the counter as I opened up, shredding what remained of the shelving and tearing apart the counter in a barrage of sound and bullets. So emboldened was I with my newfound weapons, I pushed harder against the back of the battle saddle's frame, advancing toward the counter while firing short bursts of a few dozen rounds each.

A grenade arced up, bounced off the remains of the countertop, and landed at my hooves.

I leaped back, my wings buzzing frantically as I shot upward. The grenade went off, hammering at me with the blast. After all the chaos, all the explosions, all the adrenaline, I felt numb.

The pony rose up over the counter, a submachine gun held in his teeth. It would have been the perfect follow-up, except for one fatal flaw.

He hadn't expected an opponent who could fly.

He was just looking up when I pressed the battle saddle's frame against my chest and squeezed the firing bit.

With enough bullets, even I can hit what I'm shooting at.

I kept firing until the minigun ran dry with a jolt, the barrels still spinning as I held the trigger. I floated down, landing in the street just before the grocery store. My right front leg almost gave out as I landed. A quick glance revealed a thin trickle of blood leaking out from a crack in my carapace. I ignored the wound. I couldn't feel it, so clearly it couldn't be important. Instead, I looked back to the store, panting. Nothing stirred within it.

To my left, the demolition charge had completed what the apocalypse and two centuries of decay had started, having finally flattened what was left of the motel.

Closer by, the convenience store had ceased to exist, with chunks of wall and ceiling scattered liberally about the lot it had once occupied.

And across the street from it, three faces stared out from behind the service station's counter.

I was an unfamiliar face, an alien creature of unknown intent. My final armor was stripped away. I stood looking back at the wide-eyed, wary expressions of Dusty and Starlight, and the psychotic, blood-caked grin of Sickle. I was completely exposed, and out of tricks.

My magic flickered out, letting the battle saddle drop noisily to the pavement. I wavered on my hooves.

Lacking any better options, I gave a weak and uncertain smile, my voice rather small after all the storm I had just passed through.

"Hey, guys."

Chapter Thirteen

Revealed

As I'm sure you've concluded, I didn't die there in the street, staring down the barrel of Dusty's rifle. If he had gunned me down, I obviously wouldn't be able to record these events. While there were still all sorts of consequences that could have transpired—and indeed, some which did—you at least know that I lived.

I, however, didn't have the advantage of such information with which to make such conclusions. I just had a very serious and very deadly pony keeping his rifle on me as he gave orders.

"Stop right there," Dusty said, and I obediently came to a halt just a couple yards away from the service station window. He stayed within, in the relative safety, as did Starlight and Sickle. My pistol and rifle, as well as the bolt-action rifle I had taken, lay in the middle of the street where Dusty had me set them.

Unarmed, in the open, held at gunpoint, and without a disguise; it was about the most vulnerable I had ever felt.

"Speak," Dusty commanded, the muzzle of his rifle hardly twitching as he spoke. "Who are you?"

"Fuck that," Starlight said, shoving up to the window. Her eyes glanced to my chest, where my magazine pouch and binoculars still hung, and a moment later I had the muzzle of her Lancer right in my face. "Where did you get that shit?"

I cringed back, eyes squinting as if it would somehow offer some form of protection. "Starlight, wait, it's me!" I said, only barely keeping myself from backpedaling. "I'm Whisper!"

Her expression contorted to one of supreme disbelief, and it was a full second before she blurted out a sharp, "What?!"

"I'm a shapeshifter!"

I'll be honest, I had been a little tempted to come up with some other story, some way of preserving my actual identity. Perhaps I could have convinced them that Whisper was still out there in the ruins, waiting to be found. Perhaps, but likely not, and even if I did, chances

were that the secret would be coming out eventually.

Starlight simply stared at me in silence, skepticism etched into her features. Dusty watched me calmly, past the sights of his rifle. Sickie, meanwhile, had her front legs splayed over the counter, leaning against it and grinning like this was the most entertaining thing she had ever seen. Or at least, I think she was grinning. Between all the blood covering her face and the seemingly misshapen figure under that metal muzzle, it was hard to tell for sure.

After a moment of silence, I relaxed, despite the gleam of the Lancer's focusing crystal only inches from my face. I gave a small shrug, and a weak and *very* awkward smile. "Like I said in Mareford: I've got tricks you hadn't seen yet."

Dusty's eyes narrowed slightly, but it was Starlight who spoke. "Brahminshit. If you're a shapeshifter, then... shapeshift!"

"Okay," I said, giving a cautious nod. "I can do that, but... could you maybe not have your weapons pointing at me when I do? It's very sudden and flashy, and I'd really rather not be shot because I startled you."

Both she and Dusty looked unhappy with the idea, but after a moment Dusty lowered the muzzle of his rifle to point at the ground between my hooves, and a moment later Starlight did the same. It would take them only an instant to bring their weapons to bear, but at least I had more than a single unintentional twitch between me and death.

"Okay, fine," Dusty said. "Now get on with it."

I nodded, then closed my eyes as I called up my magic.

Adrenaline is an amazing thing. It kicks everything into overdrive, from heart-rate to metabolism, and can even heighten senses in ways. It also dulls pain. That's useful when you need to fight through an injury. It's not so useful when you really needed to know you were hurt.

I cried out as pain tore through me. I collapsed to the ground, clutching a foreleg tight against my left side as if I could physically contain the terrible sensation that had erupted there. It felt as if a blade had just been driven in along the edge of my thoracic plate, or between the ribs it had turned into.

My cry died away into a grunt as I grit my teeth, sucking in deep breaths and hissing out again as I held my side. A spot of dampness was

slowly but steadily growing.

“Okay,” Dusty said, his voice sharp. “What the hell was that all about?”

I wheezed between clenched teeth. “Think... I’ve been shot. Or shrapnel. Something inside... cut me up when I changed.”

That was enough talking for me, I curled up a little more, holding my side. After several seconds, I felt stable enough to crack my eyes open.

Both Dusty and Starlight had their weapons pointed at me. They had been exchanging quiet murmurs, but stopped the moment I looked at them. Sickie, meanwhile, had leaned further out over the counter so she could still see me, though she looked as if she were about to tip over.

I spoke up, trying not to whimper, and not entirely succeeding. “I could really use some medical attention.”

Starlight stared down at me, with only the faintest hint of sympathy behind her glare. “So you can look like her. That doesn’t mean you *are* her. Just... I don’t know, tell me something only she would know.”

If I had ever given serious thought to the previously ludicrous scenario of having to convince a pony that I really was the same individual I had been disguised as, after having revealed my true nature to that pony, perhaps I wouldn’t have felt quite so lost as I did at that moment. Instead, I stammered, eyes wandering as I tried to think past the pain. After several seconds of weak panting, it hit me. I looked up to meet Starlight’s eyes, my voice quiet. “Midnight.”

Starlight’s head drew back at the name, her eyes widening slightly. The muzzle of her Lancer drooped, wavered, and finally lowered all the way. “Holy shit,” she murmured, slowly looking me over from head to hoof.

Slowly, laboriously, I managed to disentangle myself from my stolen cloak and push myself up until I was sitting. As I took a break, panting softly, Dusty finally spoke up, his voice calm. “I always knew you were full of shit. I just didn’t think it went *this* far.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, wincing as I shifted my position to put less weight on my side. “I tried to be as honest as I could without—”

Dusty’s expression changed in an instant, eyes narrowing as he

snapped, "Well you sure didn't try very hard!"

The pain made it hard to maintain a calm, neutral expression, but I somehow managed. "It's not as if I'm the only one who kept secrets, *sergeant*."

He bristled, the muzzle of his rifle rising to point at me as he growled around its bit. "That's not even close to the same thing. Fuck, I don't even know what the hell you are!"

"No, it's not the same thing," I replied, as my body tried to squeeze out its final dregs of adrenaline. I did my best to stay calm, though my legs trembled, more from pain than from fear. "My secret was a matter of survival. You saw what I look like!" I winced again at the stab of pain in my side, taking a few more breaths to calm down. "...How long do you think I'd last if I wasn't disguised as a pony? My shapeshifting is the only advantage I have out here. The more ponies know about it, the weaker that advantage becomes... but I was willing to risk giving that up to save your lives."

Dusty was rigid and silent for several seconds. Then he slowly relaxed, the muzzle of his rifle dropping again. After another second of staring, he finally spoke again. "Starlight? Get her fixed up. Just drag her ass in here first, I don't want you out in the open if a straggler shows up. And you," he said to me, "are going to tell us everything, and I mean *fucking everything*."

I nodded.

Starlight opened the metal door on the backside of the structure and walked up to me, looking entirely uncertain about the situation. After a few moments of indecisive wavering, she lit up her horn. Her magic lifted up under me, helping me get to my hooves and giving me a little stability as I hobbled my way in.

I didn't think to mention before, but the small service station building bore impressive scars from the fighting. The concrete face of the building had been chewed up and cratered by the incoming fire, leaving small heaps of pulverized concrete around its base, but the building had held strong. When I had stepped in through the door, I saw that the back wall also bore quite a few craters from bullet impacts, forming a nearly perfect rectangle in mirror of the window at the building's

front. The amount of incoming fire must have been intense.

I finally collapsed onto my side behind the counter, my cloak giving a little protection against the small chunks of concrete scattered about the floor.. Dusty glanced my way, but mostly kept his eyes outward while Starlight pulled out her medical supplies. Sickie still leaned on the counter, but had twisted around to see me, leaving her leaning at an awkward angle. With the way she slowly wavered, I half expected her to collapse at any moment.

“Well?” Dusty said, casting a sharp glare my way before looking outward again. “Get talking.”

I sighed. This was exactly the sort of thing I had wanted to avoid, but there was no getting around it. “Have you ever heard of changelings?”

“Nope,” Dusty said. The relief I felt at having the opportunity to plead my case free of any pre-existing bias clashed with the disappointment at not finding any potential lead on my own kind.

“Well, that’s what I am,” I said. “We’re shapeshifters. We use our ability so we can live safely among ponies, and...”

I hesitated, glancing back to where Starlight was laying out her medical supplies.

“And?” Dusty prompted with an impatient tone.

I can’t stress enough just how much I did *not* want to elaborate on the subject, but I didn’t see that I had much choice. After all, if I didn’t, and they ever learned even the most basic details of changelings at a later date, it would destroy any chance that they would trust me. As much as I hated it, my only option was to tell them, and hope they were decent enough to not do anything drastic.

“...And I want you to appreciate that I could easily not mention what I’m about to tell you. It’s absolutely not in my personal interest for you to know. It’s something you wouldn’t know if I didn’t tell you, and if I were trying to deceive you, it’s the sort of thing I wouldn’t tell you. I’m putting a lot of trust in you by telling you this, and I just want you to consider that.”

Dusty cast another glance my way, rightfully suspicious.

I winced a little as Starlight nudged my leg from my side and pulled aside the cloak. She carefully dabbed a cloth around the deceptively

tiny wound to wash away some of the blood.

I took another deep breath, and forced myself to speak. "Changelings need magic. We die without it. Unlike ponies, though, we don't produce it. So, in order to live, we... we have to get magic from ponies."

Starlight's cleaning halted, while Dusty's attention was fully focused on me. "What?" he asked.

"A-and magic is closely tied to emotions, especially positive ones like love. So changelings, we... we can feed on that love to get the magic we need to live..."

That statement broke Sickle. While Dusty and Starlight stared at me, the armored mare cracked up. "Oh, oh wow!" she cried out past her laughter. She finally lost her struggle for balance, collapsing to the side to sit propped up against the wall. "You eat *love*? Hah, you are so *fucked*!"

I couldn't help scowling at her. "Yeah, it kind of sucks at times. Thanks."

"Shut the fuck up," Dusty snapped to Sickle before turning to me, glaring. "You mean to tell me you've been *feeding* on us this entire time?"

"No," I said, casting an awkward glance to my side. "...Just Starlight. She's the only one who liked me enough to get anything from." Using the past tense hurt, even if it was true at the moment. "Even then, I've been close to starvation this whole time."

Starlight sat stock still for a second, then returned to cleaning the wound with a little more firmness.

Sickle was clutching her bloody side, still laughing. "Oh fuck, that hurts. Heh! Wait, so Starlight loves you?" Her laughter grew louder. "I knew you two cunts were fucking! Hah!"

I gritted my teeth as Starlight jabbed the cloth against me again. "Romantic love doesn't require physical intimacy, nor is it the only kind of love," I said, even though I was fairly certain Sickle wasn't actually listening. "Starlight and I are friends." I hesitated, casting an uncertain look her way. "At least, I hope we still are."

She didn't answer, or even meet my eyes. She focused entirely on her work. The cloth floated away, replaced with the forceps. She stuck

the tip of them into the wound, and I jerked, grunting out in pain.

"Don't move," she murmured.

"That really hurts," I grunted between clenched teeth.

She didn't answer, while I did my best to remain still as she probed around in my wound. My best wasn't very good, and my panting soon grew increasingly strained.

As Starlight worked, she gave the occasional mumble, though it seemed more to herself or Dusty than to me. "This isn't like a wound track," she said, twisting the forceps and moving her head to get a better view while I squirmed. "It's more like ground meat in here."

I grunted and whimpered, tears clouding my eyes. "C-can I please have a painkiller? That really, *really* hurts."

"It's going to hurt a lot more if you keep squirming," Starlight murmured. "This should be quick."

The forceps twisted, and I cried out. "Starlight! I'm sorry, okay? Please!"

The forceps froze as Starlight looked me in the face, her eyes suddenly wide. She looked at my pleading expression, then the tears rolling down my cheeks, and her jaw trembled. She wavered for a moment, then the forceps slipped away. I groaned in relief, and she turned, digging through her medical supplies once more.

She didn't bother with the pills. A few seconds later, a needle floated over to my side. The pricking sensation was barely noticeable beside the pain of my wound, and within moments I could feel that pain slowly but steadily sliding into the background.

Starlight sat silently, staring down at my wound, as if refusing to make eye contact with me. She murmured, "Let me know when it's working."

I laid my head down, slowly panting. The feeling of pain didn't exactly go away. I could still feel it there; it just didn't *hurt*. "Okay," I said between breaths. "Thank you."

She went to work again, but this time the forceps twisting around inside me simply provoked feelings of unease instead of excruciating pain. The feeling of something *tugging* inside of me, and of the fleshy body distending around it, was particularly disturbing. I whimpered

quietly as the object was pulled out.

Though I had closed my eyes, I could picture Starlight's expression of skepticism just from her voice. "Uh, that isn't a bullet, or shrapnel."

Dusty stepped over, speaking up a second later. "Is that bone?"

"I think it's part of a rib."

I whimpered a little more.

The forceps returned, probing through the wound. Eventually, she fished out two twisted fragments of metal and another shard of bone. "Looks like that's everything," Starlight said, finally setting those accursed forceps aside.

We eventually retrieved a healing potion from my bags. The vial had cracked at some point, but it had leaked only enough to dampen the bottle. I downed its contents, then lay back again while it went to work.

Past the painkillers, I could feel the strange sensation of my fleshy disguise shifting and mending in a distinctly unnatural way. My breathing slowed, and just half a minute later I felt steady enough to sit up again under my own power. Only a tiny feeling of pain lingered in my side, muted to mere discomfort by the painkillers. "Thank you," I said, quietly.

Starlight looked away as she packed up the medical supplies again, her ears hanging low.

"Okay," Dusty said, still eying me cautiously. "So you've told us what a changeling is. What about *you*?" He stepped away from the counter to sit right in front of me, staring me in the eyes. "Extensive knowledge of old-world tech, particularly military and industrial tech, an expert at hacking, talented at stealth and deception, and a clever talker. Now we can add demolitions and heavy weapons. You didn't just walk off a farm a few weeks ago."

They hadn't shot me—yet—over the whole issue of feeding on them, so the rest was relatively easy. "I'm what's referred to as an Infiltrator. Or... at least, I was." I shook my head. "Infiltrators go out from the hive to blend in among ponies. Mostly, it's to get love, so the hive doesn't starve. Sometimes... well, we're already blending in among ponies anyway, so every Infiltrator gets some education in espionage,

just in case.”

Dusty stared at me. “So you’re a spy.”

My gaze lowered to the ground. I felt very small. “Basically.”

He was silent for several seconds as he considered me. “Magic-stealing shapeshifting bugs, hiding among ponies, looking like whoever they want. Celestia knows I’ve seen some fucked up things out there, but that takes the cake.” He snorted, then leaned in. “How many of you changelings are there?”

My ears drooped. “As far as I can tell... one.”

Dusty practically growled. “Brahminshit. What was that you were saying about a hive, then?”

I sighed, trying to piece together exactly how to say what I had to say. Unfortunately, Dusty didn’t have the patience to wait.

“Hey!” he said, shoving a hoof against my shoulder. “I’m about done with this. No more delaying. No more sidetracks. No thinking up excuses. Just answer the fucking question!”

“It’s complicated,” I said, meekly.

“No it’s not!” he shouted. “You open your fucking mouth, and you tell us the truth. That’s not complicated!”

“Yes it is,” I replied, a little more forcefully. “I could come up with a dozen different lies that you’d buy without problem, but the truth? Dusty, I *lived* through it, and even *I* have a hard time believing it!”

“I don’t fucking care!”

Starlight stirred. “Dusty,” she cautioned, but her voice was resigned and quiet, with no strength behind it.

A shudder passed through me. “Fine! You want the truth? You know why I know so much about the old world? It’s because I *lived* it!” Dusty’s eyes narrowed a little more, but I didn’t spare the time to consider what he might be thinking. I just pressed on. “I hatched just after the war kicked off. I grew up and trained while ponies and zebras were all killing each other. I spent *years* in Equestria, right up until you all tried to kill the world!

“I got called back, stuffed into a chrysalis to sleep. Except it didn’t go right, did it? I woke up two weeks ago. I wake up to find my queen is dead. My sisters are dead. The whole world is wrecked. S-so I go out,

hoping to find others. The first day I'm out, I get held at gunpoint just for approaching some ponies. The second day, I see most of them get slaughtered by raiders!"

Starlight twitched, looking at me.

"And it just keeps getting worse!" I was trembling as I rose to my hooves. "I live on *love* of all things, and here I am, stuck in some ruined hellscape where ponies murder each other for *fun*! I've barely made it two weeks. I'm starving, and lost, and I've nearly died so many times, a-a-and the only thing keeping me going is this p-pointless hope that my entire hive isn't *fucking dead*!"

Dusty was blinking as he stared back at me, though his glare was gone. When I finally realized I had pressed up, muzzle-to-muzzle with him, I tried to step back, but I was trembling too much. My hind-leg gave out, and I sat back, hard. My vision had gone blurry as tears flowed. When I spoke again, it was barely a whisper. "A-and I just threw all of that away to save the only friends I had, and..."

I was met with silence. Then Sickle stirred, her metal plates clattering noisily in the sudden silence. "Holy shit," she rumbled, a touch of amusement lingering in her slurred voice. "Must be serious. Whisper used a cuss word."

She gave a quiet snicker, but I didn't find the amusement in it. I just sat there, trying not to sob.

Say what you want. I managed to hold out for two whole weeks before the inevitable emotional breakdown. I think I did rather well, all things considered.

The silence dragged on for several seconds before Dusty spoke again. The heat was gone. If anything, his voice was soft and gentle, though cautious. "Is there any way you can prove that?"

I sniffled, raising a shaky hoof to wipe at my eyes. "...What do you want, Dusty?"

He was frowning slightly, his eyes slowly wandering. "Just... anything that would show me I could trust you again."

"I don't know," I murmured, slowly shaking my head and sniffing. "Maybe... maybe the place I woke up. There might be something. Or... my old hive... if it's still there..."

He mulled it over for several long seconds before slowly nodding. "Okay. Okay, if it's not too far, you can take us there and show us. It'll have to wait until we're done here, though. And... sorry, but I'm not letting you carry any weapons until then."

I nodded weakly.

"Shouldn't take too long. Those explosions you set off will draw a lot of attention. The Militia should have a patrol heading this way already. Soon as they get here, we can get this all sorted out for good."

A chill passed through me.

Dusty must have noticed my expression, as he added, "I'll just tell them you got separated and came up behind them. Don't need to get into details."

"I appreciate it," I said, wiping at my eyes again and swallowing past the lump in my throat. "But there might be a problem with that."

Dusty frowned. "What's that?"

"I-I know you might not trust what I have to say, but... but there's something you should see."

He considered me, and finally nodded. "Okay. What is it?"

I pushed myself up, standing on still-shaky legs. "It's in the grocery store."

There was a hint of suspicion to the way he looked over me, but he finally gestured toward the door. "Lead the way."

We started out—and immediately halted as Sickle struggled to right herself. "I got it," she insisted, though her uncoordinated efforts merely left her slumped against a wall.

I could relate, to a degree, not that it stirred much sympathy in me. It was just enough for me to ask, "What's wrong with Sickle?"

"She's a raging psychopathic bitch," Starlight said as she pressed a shoulder against Sickle's, using it and her magic to help the armored mare up. "Aside from that, she lost like a gallon of blood and downed half a bottle of painkillers. Incidentally, if she falls asleep, make sure Dusty or I know it, or she might not ever wake up again."

"I'm fine," Sickle said, staggering for a couple steps before getting her hooves properly under her. Starlight took a step away, watching the larger mare waver, but despite a stumble, Sickle remained up-

right. "Fucking cunt," she added, though she followed that with a quiet chuckle.

We made our way to the grocery store, with Dusty and Starlight scanning for threats. I kept a half-hearted eye out as well, for all the good it would do.

When we got to the edge of the grocery store, I halted at a blown-out window, pointing in. Dusty stepped up next to me, then jerked to a halt. It was at least three seconds before he found the ability to speak again. "What the fuck?"

He climbed in through the window and moved up to the twisted corpse of a mare in Mareford Militia garb. He halted, staring down at her, motionless.

Sickle staggered up to lean against the edge of the window, peering in. As she looked around, I got a good, grisly view of the damage to her face. While the healing potions had worked their magic, I could tell that her muzzle had been broken and set at a slight angle, and the side of it had been mangled to the point where her lips were twisted up, showing off her teeth. It looked rather horrific, especially with the bars of her muzzle leaving some of the details to my imagination.

She didn't seem to be bothered by it as she looked around the carnage of the store interior. It looked just like what I imagined a war zone would; torn-up walls, broken shelves, hundreds of spent casings, and several dead ponies. She gave a quiet chuckle. "Not bad," she said in her low rumble, before looking my way and giving a rather mangled grin. "For a little bitch."

I gave a weak snort and turned away. A moment later I blinked, then turned back on her. "Seriously? After all this, you find out what I really am, and suddenly you *like* me?"

It wasn't much, but there was a clear hint of... well, perhaps calling it affection would be stretching the definition of the word, as this was still Sickie, but there was certainly some positive emotion there.

"What?" Sickie said, leaning back against the edge of the window so she could lift a hoof, gesturing at me. "Ain't like I needed to see all that bug shit to know you're a... a two-faced, manipulative little cunt. Nothing new there."

"Then what?" I demanded, as silly as it was to make demands of this mare who could probably still squish me flat even in her drugged state.

She just shrugged.

Dusty suddenly stirred into action, pulling away the dead mare's assault rifle. "Everypony! Grab what you can, quick. We need to get the hell out of here!"

Starlight, suddenly drawn away from Sickie and my exchange, looked over in surprise. "Huh, what? Why?"

"Because this is a Ranger," he said, quickly throwing the contents of her pouches into his bags. "And when the Militia shows up and sees that we killed some Rangers, we're as good as dead!"

Sickie chuckled, looked to me, and gestured out to the street. "Better grab your shit."

I turned and hobbled over to my discarded weapons, grabbing them all up, including the scoped rifle and battle saddle; while I'd spent all of its ammo, it seemed likely it would be worth quite a bit. That was possibly among the least important things to consider at the moment, but it took only a moment to grab the harness in my teeth.

Dusty had just finished stripping the second Ranger when I returned, and anger flashed across his face when he saw me. "Hey! I said no guns!"

"We're a little pressed for time," I pointed out, and swallowed around the fading lump that still lingered in my throat. Before he could continue to object, I added, "They have a supply wagon, parked behind the ruined motel. Lots of ammo and supplies, and we might need it to get Sickie out of here."

"Hey, I can walk just fine," Sickie said, stumbling a bit as she pushed off from the wall.

Dusty grit his teeth, but looked back to his looting, grabbing up weapons and supplies. "Fine! Grab what you can and let's go. Quickly!"

There wasn't much finesse to our passage. We snatched up loose equipment and saddle bags, grabbing what immediately leaped to our attention rather than taking time to dig deeper. I led them out the back of the store, pausing for only a moment as Dusty grabbed a few things off the Ranger lying there. From there, it was a short trot to where the

wagon had been parked, slowed only by Sickle's pace.

Dusty whistled when he saw the heavy machine gun lying on the ground. "Shit. Bet you're happy they didn't open up on you with this instead of that minigun," he said, glancing to Sickle.

"Yeah," she grumbled. "I'm fucking ecstatic."

I threw my collected guns into the back, as did everypony else.

"You should be," Dusty said, hooking a leg under it to haul it over; Starlight quickly moved to his side, contributing her magic. "Big gun like this, it'd go through that armor like tissue. Miniguns are pretty shit against armor. They just hit you with enough rounds to finally find some weak points. That or they mixed some AP rounds in there."

"Nopony fucking cares," Sickle said, hooking a hoof over the edge of the wagon in an attempt to haul herself up, though she only made it halfway. "I'm going to take a nap."

"No you're not!" Starlight called out. "No sleeping! Take another healing potion or something."

Sickle grumbled some more, while Starlight and Dusty hauled the machine gun back into the wagon. Once it was in, they both helped Sickle up into the wagon. I offered what meager assistance I could, which mostly consisted of Sickle planting a hoof on top of my head and almost flattening me.

I panted softly afterward, while Dusty turned to me. His eyes looked down to the guns hanging around my neck. "Put them in the wagon."

I sighed, but relented, placing them in one by one. Still, I couldn't help arguing my case. "You know, if I intended to harm you, we wouldn't be here right now."

"I'm giving you a second chance. Don't push it." He slipped under the wagon's harness, getting it good and settled, and started to pull. The wagon creaked under the weight of its contents, but rolled forward. Grit and rubble crunched under the wheels as he pulled it through the ruined lot and toward the street.

Despite the wonders of the healing potion, my side still felt sore, and I could feel a steadily developing limp. "Dusty? Do you mind if I ride in the wagon? I'm feeling pretty weak right now."

He looked at me, then sighed, looking forward again. "Might as well. Not like I'll even notice compared to Sickie."

"Thanks," I said, moving to the rear of the wagon and hauling myself up. I collapsed amidst the pile of guns and ammo, ignoring the bits of metal pressed against my side—my unwounded side, that is—as I curled up. I pulled the cloak over me and closed my eyes. It helped to hold back the tears that still threatened to come back at any moment.

I felt so utterly pathetic. I'd managed to both give up my secret and completely lose control over my own emotions. Worse yet, my own words echoed in my mind. All I had to go on was hope, but my outburst finally consciously acknowledged the fear that I was simply deluding myself. Two centuries was a long time.

I heard Starlight climbing into the wagon behind me, followed by Dusty's objection. "Hey! Not you. You need to be keeping an eye out!"

"And I can see better from up here," Starlight replied. "Besides, I'm just as light as Whisper."

Dusty grumbled, muttering under his breath, but didn't argue any further.

We continued on to the quiet grind of the wheels, the rattle of loosely stored equipment, and the quiet clattering of Sickie's movements. I heard her unlatch her muzzle and drink something, presumably a healing potion. Otherwise, we rode on in silence, which proceeded to grow more and more overbearing by the minute.

Eventually, Starlight spoke up in a quiet murmur. "...Was kind of cool."

Sickie rumbled. "What?"

"Not you," Starlight said.

I cracked an eye open to see Starlight looking at me, her expression downcast and ears low. She immediately looked away, her eyes instead settling on the minigun.

Her voice remained quiet as she continued. "Just... we were stuck in that building with fifteen bajillion ponies shooting at us. Then there's all these explosions, and you come flying out of that building, blazing away with that minigun. It was... kind of badass, I guess."

She was silent again, looking awkward as her eyes lingered on the

weapon.

I sighed faintly, closing my eyes, though it was only a moment before my conscience started to prod at me. As awkward and reluctant as it was, she was reaching out to me, and as miserable as I was feeling for myself, I didn't need to be shoving her away just so I could wallow a little more.

Especially when my own survival was at stake.

So I wiped my eyes again, forced back the remaining sniffles, and spoke. "Not really," I said in a hoarse murmur. I cleared my throat, swallowed, and tried speaking again. "Mostly lucky. And sneaky."

She was quiet for a moment before speaking again. "Was still pretty badass, I guess." She reached out, poking at the minigun's barrels. "You kind of tore the place up with this thing."

I gave a weak snort. "Luck and rate of fire, then," I grumbled. "Dusty was wrong. I don't have any talent with heavy weapons. I've never even touched one before today. I probably fired four or five hundred rounds and hit, what, two ponies?"

She shrugged weakly, still not looking at me. "I think it was more than that."

"Maybe I hit some with the blind fire. Still did better with my pistol."

Sickle rumbled. "Oh, yeah, you suck," she said, applying sarcasm about as subtly as she did anything else. I looked over to see that she had unlatched her muzzle. While that last potion had mostly healed the flesh, it did nothing for the poorly-set bone, leaving her snout even more lumpy and misshapen than before her injury. "I mean, you only just killed an entire band of mercs all on your own. *Lame.*"

She snickered a little while I just looked away, feeling strangely annoyed at her contribution. After a couple seconds, her snickering abruptly stopped. "Oh, shit. That means Whimper's killed more ponies than I have. That just ain't fucking right!"

I turned to scowl at her. "I'm quite certain that's not true," I said, but she just clumsily waved a hoof in my direction, almost jabbing me with her blades by accident.

"I mean since we've been traveling together, dumbass."

I grumbled, looking away again.

It was a minute before Starlight spoke again. "So... you were really alive during the war?"

I sighed and reluctantly nodded. "Yeah, I was."

"It's hard to believe," she said, before a flash of concern crossed her face. "I mean, it's strange, not... I don't..."

She shut her mouth, looking away again with a sudden scowl. It slowly faded over several seconds before she spoke again. "And you're some kind of super-spy."

I mumbled my reply. "Not super."

"And you... *feed*... on ponies."

I sighed, unable to do any more than nod.

Again, she was silent, while I hoped this developing trend of long, awkward pauses wasn't going to become a common occurrence.

It dragged on, and on, and on, until finally she spoke again, her voice subdued. "You should have told me."

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Yeah, I get why you didn't," she shot back, then immediately looked away again, as if ashamed at raising her voice. She finished quietly. "You still should have told me."

She didn't wait for a reply. She simply stood and hopped off the edge of the wagon to walk next to Dusty. I sighed, laying my head down once more, and feeling even more miserable.

Up ahead, hidden from sight by the edge of the wagon, I heard her speaking to Dusty. "So where the hell are we going, anyway?"

"Away," Dusty answered. "We need to put as much distance between us and here as possible, before they start searching for us. About the only good news is that the explosions were so close that they'll probably send out a hoof patrol to see what happened, instead of sending one of the birds. Unless they know there were Rangers involved; then we're fucked."

"So what do we do after we get away?"

"I don't know," Dusty said, sounding very tired. "We can't go back to Mareford. We show up there, they're more likely to shoot us than listen to us, especially with a bunch of dead Rangers."

Despite how miserable I felt, I decided to speak up. If they knew

all about me, I might as well make use of that, especially if it helped rebuild some trust with them. "I could."

There was a moment of silence from the front of the wagon before Dusty spoke again. "You could what?"

"Go to Mareford."

Again, I heard only the creaking of the wheels. When he finally replied, it was with a bitter tone. "Not sure it would do any good."

Part of me wanted to just sulk silently, even though I knew it wouldn't do any good. It was time to be professional. "Depends on how you were hoping to deal with Big Gun," I said. "Were you wanting to get information that would get him arrested, or whatever it is they do now? Were you wanting to get rid of him through whatever means necessary?"

"Are you talking about *murdering* him?"

"I'm asking how you want this to end," I said. Then, in a quieter tone, added "Though after what he did to Silverline, and Quicksilver, and all the other ponies in that caravan, I can't say I'd mind if it went that way."

He mulled that over for several seconds before replying. "No. He needs to be dealt with right, so everypony knows exactly how it went down. I'll... figure something out."

"So what do we do until then?" Starlight asked.

"I don't know. I'll think of something." Another pause. "Whisper? Where was that place you were talking about?"

I blinked, stirring enough to lift my head to see him and Starlight looking back at me. "The... place I woke up? I'm not sure, precisely. Near where that tower exploded."

While Dusty had only a vague idea of what I was talking about, Starlight immediately turned to her PipBuck, looking over the map. It took only a few moments. "Right about there," she said, floating the device over so Dusty could see it, too. "Could probably get there by tomorrow night."

"If we cut through the city, maybe," Dusty said.

Starlight smiled. "I've been through there probably a hundred times. It might be a dangerous place, but it's safe enough if you know

what you're doing." Her smile faded. "Plus, the Mareford guys probably won't follow us in."

Dusty grunted. "Through it is, then."

We continued on, the wagon rocking and shaking slightly with every crack in the ancient road. I lay my head down again, watching the occasional wall of the buildings we passed.

Sickle rustled around in one of her metal saddlebags, followed moments later by the sound of a bottle opening.

Starlight's reply was immediate. "Hey! I told you, no alcohol! Not with the amount of painkillers you took."

I looked up as Sickle spit out the bottle cap. "Yeah, and I told you to eat me," she replied. "Guess you didn't listen, either." She followed that up by tilting back the bottle and taking a long drink from it.

All I heard from Starlight in reply was some quiet muttering.

Sickle downed half the bottle in one go. Then she lowered it and, of all things, held it out to me. I stared at it for a few seconds before reaching out and taking it.

Yeah, I don't like alcohol, but it seemed appropriate at the time. Not so much for the inebriating effects, although at that moment I could understand how some might find that desirable. Instead, it went back to the whole "social interaction" thing; Sickle was making a social gesture, and as depressing as it was, she was the only one currently giving even a glimmer of positive emotions toward me. So I accepted her offer, tilted back the bottle, and took a drink.

I only got a couple gulps in before she snatched the bottle away, spilling cider down my chin. "Hey, fuck-head, I didn't say you could have the whole damn thing!" I recoiled, but despite the harshness of her reprimand, she was actually smiling. "You want some booze that bad, you should have bought some for yourself," she said, then tilted back the bottle to drain the rest of it.

I may not have understood Sickle very much, but she had decided she liked me. Perhaps my rampage of gunfire and explosions had earned some respect from her, though with how little I understood her, I wouldn't even bet on that. At the moment, I had to take what little I could get.

And honestly? I could really use the knowledge that at least one of my companions was fine with me.

So I gave her a weak little smile before laying my head down again, watching the ever increasing number of buildings roll by.



The short trip through Dodge City was not as tense or frantic as I had expected. In fact, it was remarkably placid. Starlight guided Dusty through the maze of streets and ruins, with the occasional backtrack when her PipBuck warned of radiation. There were a few patches of particularly rough ground where the going was difficult, but the numerous healing potions Sickie had taken had worked their magic, and she took over the duty of pulling, easily muscling through the rougher spots.

Despite that, it was an eerie place. Even though the city was in ruins, it seemed wrong to me that it was so quiet. I'd been to Dodge City a few times. It was the only real city in that region of Equestria, and while it wasn't a teeming metropolis like some cities in the heart of Equestria, it had still been quite a bustling place. Now it was reduced to an empty shell; a silent grave for all the ponies who had lived there, and another vivid reminder to me of how much the world had changed.

My downcast mood started to break around the same time we reached the edge of the city and started out into the barren land beyond. I'd allowed a few hours of feeling sorry for myself, perhaps venting some of the feelings I had been holding back those two weeks. Now it was time to focus again.

So I sat quietly in the wagon, trying to figure what to do next as we continued on into the evening.

It was getting dark when Dusty finally called a halt, many miles away from Dodge City. The rugged terrain had slowed our progress, but it made it easy to find a fairly safe place to camp. Sickie pulled the wagon into a narrow draw, and I wearily hopped down.

A quiet lingered over our group as we set about feeding ourselves. I got a can of beans, which I ate without enthusiasm. I was only about halfway through it when Starlight's curiosity finally led her to break

the silence.

“So... do you even need to eat, even though you feed on... love?”

I was surprised it had taken so long for the subject to be brought up again. The topic had been thoroughly sidetracked by more pressing matters, but I had known that was only delaying the inevitable. I was simply surprised at how long that delay had been.

“Yes,” I said, plainly. I’d spent enough of the day moping; it was time to be clear and open. “I have similar nutritional needs as a pony, especially when I’m in the form of one. The need for magic is separate from that. Magic is required for several biological functions, especially mental processes. Without it, a changeling rapidly degenerates and dies.”

Starlight frowned, looking me over before asking, “Degenerates how?”

I swallowed another mouthful of beans before answering. “It affects a lot of things, but it hits the nervous system hardest. Early stages of magic starvation include headaches, difficulty focusing, and confusion, as well as physical weakness and a loss of coordination. Once the final bits of magic are used up, it progresses rapidly into severe dementia, paralysis, and organ failure. The whole process from magic depletion to brain death is less than half an hour.”

She had blanched, staring at me. After a moment, she blinked, shaking her head. “That sounds horrible.” Then a questioning, perhaps even suspicious look crossed her face. “You sound awfully calm about it, too.”

“I’ve been living with it my whole life,” I said, shrugging. “For me, it’s just one more on the long list of things I need to live. Food, water, air, livable temperature, etcetera, etcetera... and magic.”

Sickle snickered, helpfully adding, “Booze, chems, sex—”

Starlight ignored her. “Yeah, except you take magic from ponies. That’s a bit different.”

Tossing her can aside, Sickle grabbed another. “Hey, didn’t we take this food from some ponies?”

I ignored Sickle as well, even though I was a little impressed by her insight. “Yes, I have to get magic from ponies. That’s the part that causes problems.”

“I bet,” Starlight muttered, and focused on her food for a minute,

as if taking her anger out on the poor can of pickled beets. Eventually she spoke up again. "So if you've been *feeding* on me this whole time, how the hell does that work? And what the hell does that make us to you? Prey?"

I stiffened, ears shooting up. My reply was sharp and simple. "No."

Dusty looked up from his own food, quirking an eyebrow at me. "You got awful defensive, there."

I gave him a firm stare. "You could call it a cultural issue," I said.

He stared right back. "Well why don't you explain it, then?"

I held his gaze for a few seconds before turning away with a snort. "There are... were... *whatever*... some changelings who saw ponies that way, but their views were antithetical to my hive's."

"Uh-huh," Dusty said. "And why the difference?"

"History," I said.

"Boring," Sickie said, jamming a leg-mounted blade into her unmarked can in a crude attempt to open it. I continued to ignore her.

"It used to be that most changelings felt that way. Back then, changelings were all united in a single hive." I snorted. "Ruled by the great Queen Chrysalis," I said, lacing my words with every ounce of sarcasm and disdain I could muster. "She led our people against Equestria time and again, trying to enslave every pony so she'd have a huge source of magical power. When tensions started rising between ponies and zebras, she helped promote it, hoping to weaken Equestria enough that she could prevail.

"Eventually, Equestria had enough. They sent one of their newly equipped armies south, hoping to force Chrysalis to stop her raids, or maybe even capture her. Of course, she fought back. Led the army, even. I don't think she appreciated just how much had changed. She was very distinctive, and I suspect every soldier there wanted to be the hero that ended her threat. Enough fire battered her defenses that a single bullet got through, striking her in the chest. That was enough to bring down the great Queen.

"Lots of changelings died, fighting for her. Some were captured, taken prisoner. They were treated well enough, I suppose, but it didn't prevent most of them escaping. Most of the survivors, though, scat-

tered. They formed new hives. Some clung to Chrysalis's ideas. Others recognized them as misguided.

"My hive was one of the latter. We recognized that we needed ponies to live, but that didn't have to lead to hostility. We sought a safer and more beneficial relationship. We still had to feed on ponies, but we sought to help and protect them, too. We made friends, helped ponies who needed it, that sort of thing. It wasn't a perfect coexistence, but it was a decent arrangement, and one far less likely to provoke retribution."

"How generous of you," Starlight murmured before getting another mouthful of food.

"It was a very practical arrangement," I replied. "And for those of us who grew up having never seen ponies as prey, it was also easier on the conscience."

Starlight scowled, though her expression had faded by the time she finished chewing and swallowing her last bite. "And how does—"

"Oh, fuck yeah!" Sickie suddenly bellowed. "Pineapple!" We all looked over to see her grinning over the mangled but open can. Her grin slipped away as she noticed the attention. "What? Fuck off, this can's mine. Get your own!"

She tilted back the can to get at its contents, and we ignored her once more.

"Anyway," Starlight said, pointedly looking at Sickie before turning back to me. "How does this whole 'feeding' thing work, anyway?"

I sighed, knowing this was a particularly tricky subject. "Emotions are closely intertwined with magic. Ponies used to celebrate that, back before the war, but it slowly faded away." I shook my head. "Anyway, when a pony feels strong emotions, some of their magic gets mixed up in it. A changeling can pull those emotions out to feed on them, but it's extremely obvious, and rather unpleasant. If the pony is feeling love for someone or something, though, that makes things much easier. If a changeling is near enough to that love, or better yet, is the recipient of it, we can feed on it, and extract some of that magic."

She scowled. "What I mean is, what the hell has that been doing to me?"

“Nothing significant or lasting,” I assured her. “Obviously, any magic I drain from a pony isn’t there for them to use, but most ponies generate magic faster than a changeling needs to burn through it to survive. I’ve been as restrained as possible. I’ve also only had fairly mild emotions. Friendly affection works for feeding, but it doesn’t carry much magic. I’ve barely gotten enough to get by, but it means you shouldn’t notice any difference at all.”

She muttered around another beet. “Doesn’t make it any better just because I don’t know about it.” Then she swallowed and spoke again. “So what happens to a pony if you *do* eat more?”

“For the most part, it would be like if they spent the magic themselves. They’d simply have less magical reserves.” I hesitated before continuing further. “If drained excessively, the pony would start developing more notable symptoms. Heavy depletion leads to emotional suppression, where all emotions become increasingly muted. The pony would start getting headaches, an increasing sense of fatigue, and their natural magic weakens.”

Starlight’s eyes darted back and forth as she thought. I sighed, my ears drooping, and spoke up before her train of thought brought her to where I could see it going. “And yes, you’ve felt those symptoms before.”

Her eyes focused on me as I continued, quietly. “It was after the raiders ambushed us. I... was in bad shape. It was less than twenty four hours since I’d woken up from centuries of inactivity. If not for my magic, and the ability to shapeshift, I don’t think I could have walked. My body, my natural body, was atrophied, and I was burning through magic just to keep going. I was already suffering borderline magical exhaustion, and I’d pushed my body to the breaking point. I needed a lot of magic right then, or... or I would have probably been dead by the time you woke up. I’m sorry.”

She stared at me for several seconds before huffing and turning back to her food. “Sorry, huh? Why? I’m just like air to you, right?”

I winced. “No! Starlight, I *am* sorry. I had to feed or I would have died, but I didn’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt *anypony*, especially not one I consider my friend.”

Her expression softened slightly, though she remained focused on her food. It was a minute before she replied. "Friends don't do stuff like that to friends."

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm sorry."

She cast a glance my way. Her eyes lingered for a moment before drifting back over to her food, and she sighed. She didn't say anything else.

When it was obvious our conversation wasn't continuing, Dusty chimed in. "So, new rule: no feeding on us."

I frowned at him. "You might as well tell me I can't drink anything. That would kill me about about as quickly."

"I'm sure you'll find a way."

"Dusty, I'll be lucky to last two days, and that's with minimal physical exertion and no more magic use than simply maintaining my form."

He shrugged, though from his frown, I got the impression he wasn't completely dismissing what I said. "Then why don't you just drop the whole shapeshifting thing? We all saw what you looked like."

"That might get me a couple hours, if that," I said. "Unless I need to disguise myself again, at which point I'll run out even quicker. It takes a lot more to assume a form than it does to maintain it, and I don't intend to let anypony else know what I am. You three are the only exception to that."

Sickle spoke up again. "Eh, don't mind those pussies, just because they're all creeped out by the whole bug-monster brain-feeding shit." She rose from her sitting position just to shift around, sprawling back against the side of the wagon so she could spread her legs in a familiarly lewd manner. An armored hoof patted at her crotch. "I've got all the lovin' you can eat, right here."

I fixed her with my best flat glare. "That's not how it works," I said. I looked away, but a moment later my glare faded away as my emotional reaction relented to more practical considerations. "Are you proposing a trade?"

Sickle's armored head tilted, and she frowned. "What?"

"Are you proposing a trade?" I repeated. "Sex for food?"

Starlight finally looked up from her food, giving me a shocked look.

“Seriously?”

I didn’t quite meet her gaze. “I have fairly limited options at the moment.”

Sickle growled. “I’m proposing sex because it’s fun, you dumb cunt.” She snorted, tipping back the can to slurp down some more pineapple chunks, then immediately started talking with her mouth full. “Ain’t like I give a flying fuck if you sip a bit of magic or whatever the fuck it is you do, so long as it doesn’t bother me none. Eat away.” She finished off the can and tossed it aside. “If you can find any love in there, you’re welcome to it.”

I frowned, finding that line rather concerning, but eventually I nodded. “In that case, I’ll have to decline the offer of sex. But... thank you.”

Starlight kept watching me out of the corner of her eye as I finished up my can. I looked up to meet her eyes, but she looked away, and I returned to my meal. Soon she was watching me again. I pretended not to notice.

It wasn’t long before our meal was done, and we prepared to sleep. I was just settling onto my bedroll and pulling my blanket over me when Dusty approached Sickle about standing watch. “You’re going to have to step up and actually take a shift tonight, since Whisper is out.”

“Fuck that,” Sickle rumbled, stretching out with the faint clinking and clanking of her armor. She rolled onto her side, facing away from him. “She can watch just like she always has.”

“Look, with any luck, we’ll get this all sorted out tomorrow, so it’ll just be the one night. Until then, she’s not carrying a gun, and that means she’s not standing watch.”

Sickle draped a foreleg across her face, muffling her voice. “Hey, I don’t carry a gun either, guess I can’t stand watch either.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, well, what you mean is fucking stupid,” Sickle replied, then lifted her hoof again to look at him. “She just murdered like forty fucking mercs—”

I quietly interjected, “It wasn’t that many.”

“Oh really?” Sickle said, rolling over to look at me. “So just how many ponies do *you* think you killed, today?”

I glared at her for a couple seconds before finally relenting with a sigh. “Probably... somewhere between twenty and thirty.”

“Twenty or thirty,” Sickie repeated. “And they weren’t a bunch of dumbass raiders, either. These fuckers were all well-armed mercs and fancy-ass Rangers.” She rolled over again, once more draping her foreleg across her face. “But yeah, I’m sure the only reason she ain’t fucked you up is because you said she can’t have a gun.”

Dusty looked between the two of us, as if uncertain which one was more deserving of his disapproving glare.

I simply muttered, “I don’t think you’re helping, Sickie.”

“Who said shit about helping?” she replied.

Finally, Dusty sighed, shaking his head. “You’re really not going to pitch in, are you?”

“Fuck off,” Sickie muttered. “I’m sleeping.”

It was still several long seconds before Dusty finally turned away. “Fine. Star and I will make do.”

Sickie muttered something under her breath, but didn’t stir.

Myself, I simply pulled my blanket up a bit more and closed my eyes.



A hoof thumped firmly against my back, stirring me. I don’t think I’d even had time to drift off to sleep. I opened my eyes, looking back over my shoulder, and saw Starlight standing over me. Her expression was tight and wary, and she spoke as soon as I looked up to her. “Were you really going to make that deal with Sickie?”

I sighed, laying my head down again. “I’m an Infiltrator,” I said, my voice quiet. “That means that sometimes I have to do things I’d rather not. If that’s what I had to do to survive, then yeah, I would.”

I could tell from her silence that she wasn’t comfortable with the idea. It took a minute before she replied.

“Yeah, look. I’m not happy with all this shit, but I don’t want to make you starve to death just because you were a colossal ass. So if it starts getting to that point, then I’ll... help you.”

I looked up to her again. I could have pointed out how it would be a little more complicated than that, when there were no affection

present, but I didn't. I simply gave a weak smile. "Thanks."

"Only if it's necessary," she quickly added. "If I start getting random headaches, I'm kicking your ass, okay?"

My smile grew a little more, along with a soft chuckle. "Okay."

"Okay," she echoed. I thought I might have caught a tiny hint of a smile. Then she gestured with a hoof. "Get back to sleep."

I laid my head down again as she walked off, feeling as if a tiny bit of hope had returned.

Chapter Fourteen

Past and Future

Being an Infiltrator, I was used to adapting to strange or unexpected circumstances. Improvisation is key when your job involves dozens of unpredictable factors. I always considered myself good at adapting, and it's one of the skills that saw me placed as an Infiltrator.

The Wasteland tested that adaptability. While it had challenged me in ways I had never expected, and I had certainly stumbled in my attempts to handle that challenge, I had pressed on. While I was certain there were still many facets of this new world that I had yet to face, I was increasingly confident that I could, eventually, face them with the same confidence that I had faced the challenge of infiltrating a largely alien society consumed with xenophobia and war.

I was doing what changelings do best: I was adapting.

In just a couple weeks, the constantly overcast skies had become a simple fact of life. Seeing clear sky again was almost jarring, but in the most pleasant way imaginable.

As we passed under the ragged edge of the clouds and into the warmth of the bare afternoon sunlight, our attention turned upwards. Dusty and Starlight were practically enraptured by the sight. They had seen the sky before, in tiny glimpses, but never in such a wide expanse. To them, the sun had always been held back behind the clouds, like a prisoner glimpsed past the bars of her cell. Seeing it free of constraint, beaming its warmth down upon us, was an experience as new to them as the Wasteland had been to me.

Even Sickie cast the occasional glance upwards, typically followed by pretending she hadn't.

As for myself, it was an instant dose of nostalgia. Despite all the problems I still faced, I couldn't help smiling. The dark mood that had lingered over our group faded, as if burned away by the light.

Soon the sky turned to pink and amber as the sun descended to the horizon. We continued on, even as the final light of day faded and the stars began to shine in the darkness. The night was every bit as beautiful

as the day as we continued on. It was only a couple more miles to our destination. With the lack of clouds, the night was reasonably bright, lit by the moon that already hung high in the sky above us.

I found it quite fitting that Starlight found the night sky so fascinating. She tripped and stumbled many times, but it didn't keep her from gazing up at the stars.

About half an hour later, we came across the spur of railroad tracks that had split off from the main line, and followed them up the gentle slope leading to the C.L.T. facility. The first thing to come into view was the building-sized piece of debris lying outside the fence, with its smooth white face and jagged metal back. It loomed in the darkness as we approached.

"Woah," Starlight said as we approached, and she could finally make out the details. "Is that... is that part of that tower that exploded?"

"It is," I replied, nodding. "It was still smoking when I got outside."

She whistled, peering closely at it as we walked by.

As we made our way around it, the facility came into view: the ratty fence, the vacant guard shack, the collapsed wagon shelter, and finally, the bunker-like concrete entryway, protruding from the side of the hill. The dim light made the whole place feel even more dead and vacant.

Starlight paused beside the guard shack, reading the weather-worn sign. "Crystal Life Technologies, Experimental Site Alpha." She cocked her head, frowning for a moment, and looked back to me. "What exactly is this place?"

"I'm not sure, precisely," I said, as we passed through the gate. "What I do know is that C.L.T. was a medical company focused on long-term health and longevity, that they were the primary developer of suspended animation technology, and that they tested some of that technology here. It's that technology that had caught my hive's interests."

"Is that how you, uh..." Starlight looked around as if searching for the right words. "...got here?"

"It seems that way," I said. "Some combination of that and a hibernation chrysalis."

She immediately halted. "Wait. Isn't that the queen you said tried to take over Equestria?"

“The word ‘chrysalis’ basically just means cocoon,” I said, suppressing a sigh before continuing. “Although I suppose it’s technically inaccurate, if you want to get down to semantics, so I guess it’s more of a tradition.” A moment’s thought led to a frown. “I suppose that’s probably because of *her*, too.”

“Uh-huh.”

I don’t think she quite appreciated the cultural and etymological issues evoked by that word.

We made our way through the vacant yard, toward the gaping maw of the facility entrance. Sickie parked the wagon and unhitched herself while Dusty eyed over the scene.

“Any dangers in there we should know about?”

“There weren’t any when I left,” I told him. “Unless something moved in during the last couple weeks, it should be clear. There were no turrets or other defenses.” A sudden thought occurred to me. “Do we have any rope? There’s a collapsed stairway to get down to where I woke up, maybe thirty feet deep. I just flew up it, but that’s not really an option for the rest of you.”

Starlight gave me a sideways look, hesitating for a moment before coming back to the conversation. “Yeah, I’ve got some rope. I’m not sure if it’s strong enough to support Sickie.”

Sickie stepped up behind us. “You calling me fat, runt?”

“Yeah, Sickie,” Starlight said with a roll of her eyes. “Those were the exact words I used.”

Sickie responded by lifting up a forehoof and “lightly” pushing Starlight, which sent the much smaller pony sprawling. While Starlight grumbled and picked herself up, Sickie just chuckled.

Dusty cut off any further nonsense. “It’s getting late. Let’s check this out and be done with it, so we can get some rest.”

After everyone agreed, we set out. Dusty had me lead once more.

The large hydraulic door, a foot thick, was retracted into the ceiling. It looked like it probably weighed several tons. I didn’t even remember it from when I had left the place just two weeks earlier, which I felt spoke much of my state of mind at the time. It made sense, though; the place had been locked down for two hundred years, so it seemed

unsurprising that it should have a serious door to keep it sealed.

Stepping into the lobby was both slightly familiar and incredibly alien at the same time. While the memories were fuzzy from their proximity to my long sleep, I could vaguely remember following these same steps into a well-lit lobby, one that had been clean and simple. The only sign of the troubles of the world had been my hive's soldiers, keeping guard over the entrance and without disguises.

This time, it was nearly pitch black. Only a narrow cone of floor was dimly lit by the moonlight, which shone softly through the entryway. Starlight lifted her PipBuck, turning up the screen's brightness until the soft green glow faintly lit the far wall. It gave the space a cavernous and unwelcoming feeling, with the corners of the room fading away into the darkness. Dust coated the surface of the desk we passed as we cautiously walked deeper into the room. The only sound to be heard was the dry echoing of our own hooves and the rattle of our equipment.

The place was dark, silent, and dead.

We slowly made our way back to the hallway at the lobby's rear and followed it. The lights that had once lit the place so well were now dark, and many of them hung askew or had fallen to the floor. Even the emergency lighting that had illuminated my escape had gone out. In the glow of Starlight's PipBuck, only the nearest objects were well-lit, cast into sharp contrast with the shadows and muted into a monotonous green. That light quickly faded, leaving us in a tiny island of visibility. Darkness filled the distance, marred only by the occasional glint of green light reflecting off something glossy.

Silence had taken over as we moved, a somber mood quickly settling in. For my companions, I expect it was the nerves of going into this strange place with unknown dangers. For me, it was the knowledge of what had happened in the depths of this facility, and what I was slowly drawing closer to.

As such, I found it remarkably relieving when, as we walked past a small lounge area, Starlight broke the mood.

"Oh, hey!" she called out, pointing her PipBuck light toward the back corner of the area beside us. The hallway past us was plunged into darkness as the lounge lit up a little brighter. "Got a couple soda

machines here. Think they're still full?"

Dusty huffed out a faint chuckle that likely would have been inaudible if not for how quiet the place was.

"I don't know," I said, peering at them from the hall. "I didn't consider checking them."

"We can do that on the way out," Dusty said. "I don't want to get sidetracked until we've done what we came here for."

So we continued on. A few quiet drips pierced the silence as we walked past several broken pipes. Dusty and Starlight kept looking around, alert for both trouble and opportunities, while I led them deeper.

Dusty said nothing when we passed the clusters of pock-marks scarring the walls where bullets had struck them. They were the only signs of wear and tear that I remembered from before my sleep. If anything, they were less notable, now. After two centuries, there was no more sign of the splashes of blood that had marred the scene.

The ruined store-room drew only a cursory glance, though the few rations I hadn't carried with me on my first pass were quickly added to Starlight's bags. I picked up the pace, moving toward the stairway. I was suddenly eager to get us all down it as quickly as possible.

Of course, Starlight's curious searching immediately turned up the reason for my eagerness.

"Holy shit!"

I froze, ears drooping, and looked back over my shoulder. Starlight had stepped back from the doorway beside her, casting nervous glances between the room beyond and me.

Dusty stepped up beside her, his expression tightening as he turned to me. "What the hell happened here?"

I sagged, reluctantly turning around to walk back. "I'm not certain of the details," I said, my voice quiet in the tomb-like atmosphere. "When I got here—the first time, that is, the day the megaspells went off—there were signs of fighting. Bullet holes, a few spots of blood, that sort of thing. I wasn't told what happened, and... I didn't ask. I just assumed that the ponies here weren't keen on letting a bunch of changelings use their facility."

I stepped up beside Dusty, looking through the doorway at the dimly lit heap of bones beyond.

Dusty watched me for several long seconds before speaking. "So you killed them so you could take their place."

"The world was ending," I said, my voice sounding weak and tiny. "My Queen wouldn't have made this move if there was any other way for us to survive."

"Better some ponies die than some changelings, huh?"

I winced, looking away. "It's not like that. It wasn't about ponies or changelings. It was about... trying to preserve *something*. Ponies had the Stables. But these ponies? They... they were going to die either way, but we had a chance. I don't know how it all worked, but I know there was a reason we had to combine a changeling chrysalis with their tech to survive for so long, and even then... most of us didn't make it."

I could practically feel his gaze on the back of my head. The silence dragged on for a painful time, finally broken when I heard him exhale. "Plenty of ponies would put their own kin before outsiders," he said. "Still can't say I like it."

"I can't say I do, either," I replied.

We left the room behind, moving instead to the gaping chasm that had once been a stairway. With Starlight's PipBuck held out over the abyss, the light shone on the glassy-smooth water below, pierced by several lumps of debris. The landing of the next lower floor was barely visible across the way.

"Yeah, fuck that," Sickie rumbled.

"Yeah," Starlight agreed. "That's a pretty good drop, and a sheer wall. If the rope can't hold you, I don't think you'd be getting out again."

"You might have to wait here," Dusty said. "The rest of us should make it just fine."

"You fuckers need better ropes," Sickie grumbled.

Dusty shot her a glare. "Or maybe you need to bring your own supplies."

As Starlight pulled out her rope, I called up my magic. The faintest tug was all it took to unwind my disguise, and in a flash, my fleshy pony form was stripped away to reveal glossy chitin and diaphanous wings.

“Fuck!” Starlight yelped as she jumped away, and nearly collided with a wall. Dusty had his gun up, though with the way it pointed between us, it seemed as if he was uncertain what he might need it for.

Starlight spent a few moments with her eyes closed, taking deep breaths to calm herself down. “Holy hell,” she muttered, finally looking up to shoot me a glare. “It’s easy to forget you’re some weird bug-pony thing until you do shit like that.”

I hesitated before answering quietly. “I suppose I could take that as a compliment of my acting skills.”

While it earned a single quiet snicker from Sickie, Starlight seemed entirely unamused at my attempt at defusing the situation through humor. “Just... give me some damn warning before you do the freaky bug-magic, okay?” She angrily hauled out her rope, focusing on the task at hoof and ignoring me.

She tied the rope around the largest and most stable-looking pipes running overhead, and tossed the other end out into the void. While she and Dusty climbed down one at a time, I pushed my cloak back to clear my wings, and simply flew.

The partially collapsed room beyond was as still and silent as the rest of the facility. The warbling speaker now lay silent, and the spinning orange emergency lights were still and dark. The light from Starlight’s PipBuck bobbed and weaved behind me as she climbed down the rope, and even with the superior low-light vision of my natural eyes, it did little to pierce the gloom.

Hooves splashed down in the water behind me, and a few moments later Starlight stepped out beside me, lighting the room a little better. “So this is all super-creepy,” she muttered, probably more to herself than to me.

I nodded. “It was not the most welcoming of places to have woken up in.”

She glanced my way, silent for a moment. “...Even your voice sounds weird.”

My ears drooped, though I didn’t reply, and a minute later Dusty joined us, followed by Sickie’s voice echoing after us. “Don’t you cunts take too long down there!”

We continued on.

We made our way to the far side of the room and proceeded down the long, straight hallway beyond, the metal grate flooring rattling faintly with each step. We passed doorway after doorway, steadily drawing closer to our destination. Finally, there was only a single doorway left. I came to a halt a few feet away.

“What’s wrong?” Dusty asked.

I drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out, doing my best to ignore the suspicious tone of Dusty’s question. “This place has some hard memories,” I said.

I started to draw in breath to elaborate, but I stopped myself. I could delay things for quite a long time, if allowed. Instead, I forced myself forward.

I stepped into the room, the same room I had escaped not so long ago. For a moment, it was a dark void, with only a tiny patch of the floor lit up by the doorway. Distant glints of light reflected what little of the PipBuck’s light pierced the darkness. Two weeks deep in the stagnant air had done little to improve the atmosphere, and a faint but foul undercurrent of rot lingered in the background, along with a subtlest hint of ash.

Then Starlight followed around the corner of the doorway. The light spilled out, my own stark shadow sweeping across the room.

I realized I had halted. I forced myself to continue to walk, past the sodden lump of scattered ash, the murky puddles, and the remains of the first tattered and destroyed chrysalis. I continued on until I stood before the fourth one from the left. Slowly, I raised a hoof to prod at the deflated remains. A bit of fluid sloshed, caught in the folds of the membrane, while the wires hanging from it swayed with the motion.

“I was here,” I said; my voice, though quiet, filled the silent space. “I woke up in this chrysalis two weeks ago. I had to tear my way free.”

I took a step back, my hoof falls sharp and prominent as I looked around the room again. “That’s... when I found out I was alone. I was the only one who made it. My sisters, my queen, they were all dead.”

My throat had tightened again, though I didn’t feel the need to cry. I had done that enough already. It still hurt—probably always

will—but I could accept it.

I turned to the side, walking slowly over to where I had had gathered them. “She was lying right here,” I said, dipping my muzzle.

A few quiet hoofsteps followed me, and Starlight stepped up beside me. Before us was an uneven lump of ash, turned to a sodden mush by the slow but steady trickle of water leaking down the walls.

In the quiet, I could hear the soft huff of Starlight’s breath.

“I barely made it,” I said, breaking the silence. “My body had atrophied from a lack of activity, and I was completely starved. I was on the verge of death, myself, but...” I paused, and then found myself smiling. “But she saved me.”

I turned my head, opening the flap of my saddlebag as I continued. “Queen Ephema wasn’t like most queens. Most of them saw the changelings in their hives as extensions of their will. As minions. She wasn’t like that. Any changeling would gladly give their life for their queen or hive, but only the greatest of queens would give their own life for us.”

Having retrieved my dented medical box, I set it on the ground before me and opened the lid. “She must have woken up before the rest of us, but she was trapped inside. The facility was locked down, and was supposed to remain that way until the computer thought it was safe outside. She had no way out.

“She could have woken us up. One of us probably had the electrical knowledge to force the door to open. I might have been able to reprogram the computer to lift the lockdown. But the computer said it was unsafe outside. If she did that, she might be condemning us all to death.

“Or maybe she could have traded places with one of us. Any of us would have gladly given her our place if it meant she would have a chance to live.”

My horn lit up, adding to the green glow filling the room. I was distressingly low on magic at that point, but it felt like this gesture deserved the effort. A single love crystal floated up, wrapped in my magic. “Instead, she put her love into these, and let us sleep. She gave up her life so that we might have a chance.”

I looked back over my shoulder. "And then most of us died, anyway." The smile was gone. The light of my magic winked out as I set the crystal down again.

"Ephema," Starlight said, staring off into space for a moment before looking to me. "You said that was your mother's name."

"It was."

"...Oh." She left it at that.

I was silent for a long time before I finally spoke again. "She should be here, instead of me. I don't even know why I'm here. I'm not special."

At my side, Starlight recoiled faintly, some reflexive revulsion to what I had said. Her voice croaked for a moment, as if uncertain she should say anything, but she finally spoke. "Why would you say that?"

"Because it's true."

"But you were a..." She searched for the word. "An Infiltrator. That's something."

"One of a hundred or so," I said. "Any of them could do what I do. Most of them could probably do it *better*." I gave a weak snort, finally looking at Starlight. "I'm not some super-spy like you think. I wasn't infiltrating corrupt organizations, or coordinating intel with the Ministries, or hunting out zebra spies. You know what I really did?"

She blinked back at me, as if uncertain how to reply, so I simply continued on. "I gathered love for the hive. Food. I was one step up from a farmer. The closest I got to espionage was when we discovered the smuggling going through Appleloosa. I got to keep eyes on some drug-runners. That's it."

I turned, slowly looking around the room. "I don't even know why I'm here. I don't know why I was directed here. I don't know why I was given a chrysalis. There must have been a few dozen other changelings here, so why did I get one of the few spots?"

"Well, you made it," Starlight said, though hesitantly.

"By random chance," I replied. I motioned a hoof to the back of the room. "From what I gathered from the terminal, I was woken up and released because the generators finally gave out and put the facility on backup power, triggering an emergency evacuation. If that hadn't

happened, I'd still be asleep in that chrysalis. I'd probably have died, just like all my sisters."

They both remained silent. Dusty hadn't said a single thing since we entered the room, electing to look around and listen. Starlight kept her attention on me, and in the meager lighting, she looked concerned.

I sighed. "Whatever the reason is, I'm here now. My queen was counting on us to carry on. She even gave her own life to ensure that. I might not have been special, but now I'm the only one left here to carry out that duty."

I closed up my medical box again, sliding it into my bag before turning back to them. "I know this isn't the most ideal time for it, but I'd like to ask you for a favor."

Dusty frowned slightly. "Depends on the favor."

"What is it?" Starlight asked.

"Help me find whatever is left of my hive," I said, looking from one to the other. "There must have been other places like this, other plans to make sure some of us made it. Queen Ephema wasn't the type to rely on a single point of failure. She would have had other plans in place. Some others might have made it. They might even still be asleep, waiting to be woken up. I owe it to my queen and hive to try to find them."

"I'd originally planned on nudging you in the direction I needed to go, so I could do what investigating I could on my own, but now you know what I am, so there's little reason for me to not ask you directly for your help."

They glanced at each other, but before they could decide, I added my own offer of assistance. "In exchange, I can offer my services, in full, for whatever task you might need of me. Since I no longer have to hide my true nature from you, we can take full advantage of my abilities."

Dusty was still frowning. "You mean spying? Assassination?"

"If necessary," I replied. "I know you want Big Gun brought to justice for what he's done. There were plenty of ponies like him during the war, pursuing profits and power at the expense of other ponies. They use deception and manipulation to get what they want, and that's exactly what you need to fight them."

His jaw had tightened. "Just because something *works* doesn't

mean it's the right thing to do."

I frowned as well, my eyes wandering as I considered how best to reason with him. After a moment, my eyes settled on his gun. I looked back to his face. "Would you say it's wrong to kill ponies?"

His head drew back just a hair, and he hesitated before replying. He could see where I was going with this. "That depends."

"Exactly," I said, then dipped my muzzle, gesturing to his gun. "Lies are like guns, Dusty. I don't like using guns, but sometimes they're the right tool for the job, so I use them. Lies are another tool, and just like guns, they can be incredibly dangerous if used irresponsibly. Careless lies can get ponies killed just as easily as bullets, but well-placed lies can save lives. Do you have any idea how much espionage went into protecting Equestria? Because I do. I might not have been involved directly in the major operations, but I caught bits and pieces. The fact is, if we had a few more well-placed lies, the end of the world may have never happened."

"I still don't like it," he said.

I nodded. "I doubt you like killing ponies, either."

He was silent for several seconds before replying. "Depends on the pony." He shook his head, and changed the topic. "So what happens if you find your... hive?"

"I don't know," I said, though I felt slightly uncomfortable with the answer. "That depends on them, what state they're in, and how I can best help them. I might stay with them, or stay out here. Whatever helps the most."

He nodded, slowly and thoughtfully. "And what happens to us?" he asked. "You told us how important your secret was to you. What if they don't like the idea of some random outsiders knowing all about them?"

"You wouldn't be in any danger, if that's what you're worried about. We don't turn on our allies, and I'll be there to speak for you. They might want to keep some things secret from you, but that's just how espionage goes. Besides, it wouldn't be the first time we've worked with ponies who knew what we are."

"Is that so?" he asked, though he sounded doubtful.

"It is," I said. "While we mostly operated in secret, there were times when it was beneficial to be more open about our assistance. I don't know all the details—compartmentalization of information, and all that—but I do know there were some high-up members of the Ministry of Awesome who were happy to make use of some changeling Infiltrators against a mutual foe. I even heard rumors that the Ministry Mare herself was involved."

"The Ministry of Awesome?" Starlight asked, an eyebrow raised skeptically. "They got shut down and turned into a storage lot for the other ministries. I mean, their buildings are great for scavenging if you can get past the insane security, but otherwise..."

"Officially, yes," I said. "Many ponies eventually saw it as a wasted effort, led by a showboating braggart who used the Ministry to bolster her own image." I gave a thin smile. "But that was one of those well-placed lies. In truth, Rainbow Dash ran Equestria's espionage and black-ops."

"And your hive just happened to be helping them," Dusty said.

"We had mutual interests," I replied, nodding. "Even speaking in purely practical terms, our hive was on the edge of Equestrian territory, and we were much more invested in Equestrian society than the zebras'. We preferred that Equestria should win the war, or at least emerge no worse than it had entered. After the war was over, we might even benefit from having highly placed ponies who knew our hive had come to their aid."

He looked away, thinking.

"Practical reasons aside," I continued, "we simply liked ponies more. I didn't like everything about your kind, especially not the rampant xenophobia that had grown over the decades of war, but we understand emotions quite well. Fear and anger were natural, given the situation. The zebras, though, took it to new levels. There's a reason Equestria developed megaspells that healed and protected, while the zebras turned them into weapons that could kill by the millions."

Starlight had drawn back a step, her ears hanging low. "So... the zebras really were like all those posters say? I thought those were all exaggerations..."

Dusty snorted angrily. "That's a load of crap."

I shook my head. "No, once you get past the lens of culture and experiences, zebras are just like ponies. Individually, they're quite nice. The problem lay in those cultural differences, and how it subtly colored their view of the world. The short version is, zebras had gotten the idea that your Princess Luna had turned to evil again, and had to be stopped at all costs."

Starlight slowly shook her head. "This... this is just so freaking weird..."

"I think we're getting off topic," Dusty said. "But, fine. Let's say your... hive was nice and friendly with ponies, helped out with the war, all that crap. That was two hundred years ago. What happens if they're not like that now?"

My ears drooped. I'd done a good job of not consciously dwelling on the possibility, but it couldn't be avoided forever. I drew in a deep breath and sighed it out. "...If they have changed so much that they would cast aside our ideals and turn on an ally like that, then they are no longer of my hive, and I would have no duty to them."

Dusty cocked his head, eying me suspiciously. "You'd seriously turn your back on your own kin for a few ponies you met a couple weeks ago?"

"It's not about kin," I said. I had unconsciously raised my head, adopting a stronger, prouder stance. "It's about what's right. It's how my hive was *founded*. I wasn't alive for the sundering of the hive, but our people splintered into dozens of hives. Sisters turned into rivals, even fought each other for what they believed. Queen Ephema and my sisters faced many difficulties because of our choices, and I am not going to dishonor their ideals simply because some distant relative has chosen to cast them aside!"

Dusty continued to eye me, but his expression had softened. Finally, he relaxed, nodding. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay," he repeated. "We'll help." Then he cast a glance Starlight's way. "Or I will, at least."

She nodded faintly. "Yeah."

“But!” Dusty said, holding a hoof up. “You’re going to have to be patient. This doesn’t mean we’re going to drop everything and go running off wherever you want. We’ve got something important to deal with now.”

“It’s been two centuries,” I said, forcing myself to shrug. “A few more weeks seems unlikely to make a difference. Does this mean you have an idea of how to proceed?”

“I’ll think of something.”

I raised an eyebrow, which earned a quick scowl.

“I will,” he asserted. “Look, if we’re done here, let’s head up and get some sleep. We can worry about plans later.”

I agreed, and we turned away to return to the surface.

Just outside the door, Starlight paused to look down the hall. “What’s down that way?”

“I don’t know,” I said, looking at the heavy door, barely within the radius of her light. “The door wouldn’t open.”

“Yeah?” she asked, taking a step that way. “You don’t think there’d be more of those chrysa-pods back there, do you?”

I hesitated, but after a couple seconds, I shook my head. “Unlikely. We passed several similar rooms on the way here, and none of them held changelings.”

She continued to stare at the door. “You... want to check?”

I hesitated again, and even longer. It was Dusty that spoke first. “Do you think you can get that door open?”

“Uh, hello, salvage expert.” She cast a smirk back at Dusty. “Yeah, I can get it open, unless the door’s tracks are all warped. Then it might take a while.”

My input was no longer required as she strode over to the door. Just as I had remembered, it had raised barely a hoof’s width before stopping. Starlight got down to peer under it, then rose again, checking around the edges of the door frame. It took only a few moments to find what she was looking for. She tapped her hoof against a long panel, smiling in the darkness.

A small tool kit floated from her bags, and she pulled out a socket wrench. A quick check found the socket she was looking for, and

a minute later, she had removed the long panel, setting it against the wall. Inside, the cables and thick gears that drove the door lay exposed.

I watched her poke around inside the cavity for a minute before she gave a satisfied grunt and turned back to her pack. She produced an odd, long device that I didn't recognize, sliding it into the gap under the door. She hooked a short rod on an eyelet at one end, and started to crank.

As the device expanded upwards, Dusty leaned in to look. "What is that?"

"Scissor jack," she replied, continuing to spin the crank until the top of the jack had pressed against the underside of the door. She stood again, returning to the open panel. "Mom said she got it at some abandoned train yard. Or was it the tank depot? Anyway, it's great for getting in small gaps and lifting big, heavy things."

"Just how many tools do you have in those little bags?"

"You've seen most of it," she said, and with her muzzle stuck inside the open panel, her voice echoed strangely. "Cutter, jack, prybar, a few basic tools like that socket wrench, a little electrician's kit, a chisel, stuff like that. Mom and I used to haul around a sledge, too, but it was a bit heavy for going on my own."

"Decent kit," Dusty noted. While his tone was neutral, I couldn't help but read a hint of approval in his words.

"Eh, it's a start." Starlight continued working as she talked. "I'd love to get a more complete set of tools, especially if we've got a wagon to haul stuff in. I'm set for most common bolts and such, but every now and then I run into something that I have to improvise with or just cut." She suddenly stopped, ears perking up as she drew back. "Oh, shit. I could get that hydraulic rescue tool."

It was perhaps a bit opportunistic of me, but such a clear expression of desire was one I could hardly pass up. "What's that, now?"

She grinned a little, but quickly hid it by returning to her work. "About a year ago, my mom and I were trading with somepony who had this portable hydraulic tool. Could pry things open like that screw jack, but could also clamp down or even cut right through solid steel. No cranking or anything. I guess rescue ponies used them to get ponies

out of bad skywagon crashes, when they couldn't just muscle or magic their way out. We didn't get it because it cost more than we made in a year, but now... shit, I could actually afford that."

"Hmm." I nodded. "Guess I'll add that to the list, right after Pip-Buck keys."

It was a relief when she actually chuckled in reply. "Hell, you find me one of those, you can have all the love you want!"

I saw her smile fade away almost immediately, as if she had finally processed what she had just said. I tried to continue on before the moment had entirely slipped away. "I don't think it quite works that way, but... thank you for the gesture."

A moment later, there was a sharp pop from inside the panel, and a deeper *thump* as the door settled in its tracks, held up by the screw jack. Dusty had flinched back, his mouth moving halfway to his gun before he realized how silly the gesture was. "What the heck was that?"

"I just disengaged the braking mechanism," Starlight replied as she stepped back from the panel. Her horn lit again, grasping the handle attached to the screw jack. "Now all the machinery should spin freely."

She started to crank, and though it was clear it took a good amount of effort, the jack ever so slowly expanded. Just a couple of minutes later, the jack stood at full extension, having opened the gap up to almost one foot in height.

Starlight panted softly, but was already removing her saddlebags. "Not sure if you'll fit, Dusty. I'll go check out the rest."

"I'll go with you," I said, already removing my own saddlebags and cloak. She hesitated for a moment before nodding.

She dropped to the ground and slid under the door like a slippery eel, and her magic pulled her bags through after her. I was significantly less smooth and swift with my own passage.

It didn't help that I was acutely focused on the massive steel door brushing against my chest as I squirmed under it, a subtle tactile reminder that I had only a relatively flimsy and ancient screw jack holding back a gruesome death.

Given the typical surroundings during our upbringing, the idea of claustrophobia is almost alien to most changelings, but crawling under

that door felt like a moment of understanding. I was surprised just how relieved I was to rise to my hooves again.

“Don’t be too long,” Dusty said. I can’t imagine he was too happy about being left alone in the dark. It occurred to me then that he at least had an emergency light source, if need be. His smoking habit had one advantageous side-effect.

We didn’t find much. The rest of the facility was just as worn-down and decrepit as the parts we had already seen, and the diminished numbers of our party made the silence and darkness all the more oppressive. We peeked in on dormitories and offices, none of which held anything of interest. There was no sign of any changelings having ever been there.

The whole time, Starlight kept casting wary glances my way, before turning away and pretending she hadn’t.

We found an evacuation map at an intersection of halls, and paused to read it. It was heavily stained by leaking water, but still readable. It confirmed that we had seen all of the lab areas. The level we were on was mostly labs, living spaces, and all the other areas ponies would commonly use. An entire section had caved in, destroying a good amount of living space and, to Starlight’s disappointment, the medical clinic; she briefly mourned the loss of untouched medical supplies and all the caps it could bring before moving on.

The level below us was all utility, with the map pointing out pumps, water processing, air systems, and all the other mechanisms required to keep the facility operational. It was also completely flooded, almost up to the ceiling. We declined to explore any further.

But after all of that, it was our last stop that proved the most significant. It was a completely incidental stop, one we almost didn’t make. We didn’t expect to find anything useful in the facility’s power station. We simply looked for the sake of thoroughness, at the one last room on the level.

It was clear that something was wrong when Starlight cranked the circular handle on the ship-style door, only for the door to refuse to budge. She gave it a couple of firm kicks before breaking out the pry bar.

It took several hard heaves before the door produced a loud, metallic *ping*. It flew open, banging against the inside wall, propelled by a sudden

wind that ended as abruptly as it had begun. My ears popped. “What the heck was that?”

“I don’t know,” Starlight said, stepping up to the door to peer in. I stepped up beside her to peer into the burnt-out ruins of the power-monitoring room. As we slowly made our way into the ruined space, I felt an increasing sense of nervousness.

Or so I thought. All the signs were there. My breathing was speeding up, as was my heart-rate. But it kept going. A moment later, Starlight had turned, shoving her shoulder against me. I stumbled and almost fell. Dully, I noticed that my chest felt *wrong*, and the world felt like it was off-balance. She kept pushing, shouting something I didn’t catch, but the sound of alarm was enough to drive home that something was seriously wrong.

We ran back down the hall we had come from, though my hooves felt uncoordinated. The whole world seemed to be closing in, my vision narrowing while everything else turned fuzzy. I don’t think I could even hear my own hoof-steps as I stumbled my way along the grate-covered floor. My head had started pounding at some point.

I must have stumbled and fallen, though I can’t remember the transition from running to being hauled up in Starlight’s hooves.

The world returned to normal almost as quickly as it had devolved, and I found myself lying atop a desk, with Starlight’s hooves wrapped around me. My head still felt thick and foggy, but my senses returned as we lay there, panting.

“Holy fuck,” Starlight gasped between pants. I could feel the vibration of her words, with my head resting against her chest. “I hate... this underground... shit!”

I groaned, reaching up to rub my hooves at the sides of my head. “What was that?”

“Bad air,” she said, switching to slower, deeper breaths. “There was a fire. Burned up the air. Couldn’t breathe it.”

I blinked, then groaned louder, covering my eyes. When I felt her shift beneath my head, likely questioning my reaction, I spoke again. “I’m an idiot. I grew up in an underground environment. I know how important ventilation is. I should have recognized the signs of

carbon dioxide build-up a lot quicker.” I let my hooves fall to my sides again. “Though I guess I’ve barely been back to the hive, lately. I mean, before...”

We lay panting for a few moments before I added, “Thanks.”

I felt her tense for one awkward moment, but to my relief, she relaxed again, dismissing it with an awkward laugh. “Well, I was running for my life in this general direction, anyway, so...”

It was remarkably relieving to share a simple, quiet laugh together. The fading adrenaline and lingering fuzziness in my head made for an almost euphoric moment of relief.

In our entire search of the ancient facility, that moment was the most important thing we found. My relief wasn’t only for having survived my near-asphyxiation. It felt like a moment of reconnection, where Starlight looked at me and simply didn’t see chitin and holes.

We gave the air a good ten minutes to mix and even out before heading back. We were much more acutely focused on our breathing as we headed back to the power station. It was just a quick check to see if there was anything notable, though given the evidence of fire, our hopes were low.

What we found was a giant shard of metal jutting down through the roof of the generator room. Though blackened and warped from fire, the jagged supports on one side contrasting with the once-smooth face of the other made its origins clear. It was another part of that S.P.P. tower that had exploded. This fragment had smashed down here, piercing through both the earth above and the metal ceiling, and destroyed the remaining generators. I had to wonder if another fragment hadn’t been responsible for the collapsed section of the facility.

The resulting inferno must have been intense. The generators looked like they had turned to wax and melted, leaving misshapen mounds of metal in their place. Catwalks had melted across the concrete supports, and the sloping floor ended in a glassy smooth pool, as if it had been filled with water that had, somehow, frozen into steel. The steel covering the ceiling had drooped as it melted, leaving metallic icicles hanging like waiting blades. The remains of the tower had been fused in place, sealing the whole place air-tight.

We headed back. The return trip was considerably more relaxed, almost like a casual stroll through the decrepit halls. No longer distracted by focusing so much on me, Starlight took the opportunity to duck into a few rooms to grab odds and ends. There wasn't much: a small electronics toolkit, a couple healing potions from a Ministry of Peace first-aid box, and some pony's stash of candy bars. She even tossed me one of those, and we enjoyed a little treat on the way out.

Starlight slid under the door as easily as she had the first time, and once I had squirmed my way under, she held out a hoof to help me up.

Dusty watched us with a faint frown. "Did you find any more?" He didn't ask what had taken so long, or about the sudden shifting of air that he would have felt even from back there.

We briefly described what little we had found before heading back.

At the stairwell, I simply flew up ahead of the group. The light from Starlight's PipBuck barely reached up there, and as I landed, I could only barely make out the silhouette of Sickle lying in the hall, her head resting against one wall and her hind-hooves kicked up against the opposite. She rattled and clinked as she turned her head toward me. "Well you fuckers sure took your sweet time."

"We're done now," I said, and given by her lack of reply, that seemed to be sufficient.

Dusty slowly climbed up the rope, which seemed particularly awkward to me given how he had to use his mouth to get a good grip on it. Starlight, naturally, made it look easy and ascended almost as quickly as I had flown. Once they had joined us, Sickle finally sat up. "So, are we all done with this stupid shit, yet?"

Starlight gave a quick roll of her eyes as she retrieved her rope. "Yeah, Sickle. It's all sorted out."

"About fucking time," Sickle said as she stood. She never asked about what we'd found down there.

We returned to the entrance of the facility, pausing just long enough for Starlight to break into and loot the soda machines. Then we slept.



I helped take inventory in the morning. While we'd gotten a vague

idea of the wagon's contents before, we hadn't taken the time to get a detailed count. I reclaimed my weapons with an almost anticlimactic lack of response, and then Dusty and I started going through everything while Starlight recorded the information on her PipBuck.

The details are mostly unimportant. There were hundreds of rounds of ammunition for most of our weapons, including a box of almost one hundred rounds for the monstrous machine gun. A large medical kit carried everything we would need for field surgery except the skill to do so. A dozen grenades had been spared my explosive rampage, and we uncovered a box of mines, although there were only four within it. Then there were the tools for weapons maintenance, a portable field kitchen, all the tarps, poles, and ropes needed for setting up tents or canopies, and some other basic camping gear.

And of course, there were the weapons, including some pistols, submachine guns, shotguns and a small assortment of various rifles. I was actually surprised when Dusty offered me one of the assault rifles. It struck me as a gesture of trust, or perhaps a peace offering.

Practical, too. "It's more accurate than your pipe rifle," he said. "It's also faster firing and a lot more controllable on automatic. Larger magazine and lighter ammo, too."

While I considered such a weapon largely wasted on me, I had no reason to decline. We had more ammo for it than we did for my pipe rifle, and even I would benefit from the weapon's advantages.

So it was a bit of a surprise to me that I was hesitant to relinquish my rifle. I eventually justified the upgrade by reasoning that I would still own the old rifle, even if I wasn't using or carrying it. I spent a fair amount of time thinking on that decision, later in the day. At some point it had ceased to be "Sharps' rifle" and had become "my rifle", a curious sort of sentimental attachment that I wasn't certain I was entirely comfortable with, particularly given the object of that attachment.

Dusty even took the time to show me the finer details of operating the weapon, including how to break it down for cleaning, something he said I'd want to do more than I had for the pipe rifle.

Speaking of which, even after spending a few years as an earth pony,

I'm still occasionally amazed by how adept some of them can be at manipulating things with their mouth. Watching Dusty fully strip and reassemble the weapon was impressive, and I'm still not sure how he did it without getting a bunch of oil in his mouth. As it was, I struggled a bit to mimic his feat even with the aid of magic.

I was halfway through assembling the weapon again when Sickle, kicked back against the exterior wall of the guard shack, asked the question that had been lingering in the back of our minds. "So, where the fuck are we going now?"

Starlight shrugged, watching me work.

Dusty frowned, as if thinking.

While I could come up with some destinations of more personal interest, I opted to volunteer a slightly more neutral course. "We do still need to deal with Big Gun."

"Yeah," Dusty said, though his frown remained. "I'm still trying to think of how to do that."

I paused in my assembly. "You mean, a way to do that which doesn't involve my abilities."

His frown deepened. "Yeah."

"You know he's just going to keep—"

He quickly held up a hoof. "I know! Look, I just... just give me a little more time to think on this. If I can't think of anything, then... we'll do it your way."

I turned back to assembling my new rifle. "I'm not sure if I like it being called 'my way'. I don't like it much, either. I just don't see that we have many other options in dealing with him before he hurts more ponies."

He grunted in what seemed to be begrudging agreement.

"Oookay," Sickle slowly said. "So, until Dirt here stops cunting it up, *where the fuck are we going now?*"

Dusty scowled at her. "Oh, fuck off, Sickle. This is serious."

"Yeah, you're always trying too hard to be serious," she replied, sneering inside her muzzle. "Just pull the fucking log out of your ass already and let's get moving."

Dusty held his tongue, returning to watching me assemble my

weapon with an extra-critical eye.

Starlight looked up, offering a suggestion. "If we're not doing that, what about looking for Whisper's family?"

Dusty looked over to her, thinking for a moment before finally nodding. "Yeah, we could do that."

Despite having missed the entire conversation down in the depths of the C.L.T. labs, Sickle shrugged. "Eh, at least it's better than sitting around and whining all day. So... where the fuck are they?"

"I don't know," I said.

Starlight chimed in. "That's kind of implied with the whole "looking for" thing, Sickle."

Sickle snorted, baring her teeth in a grin. "Go fuck yourself, runt." She raised a spiked hoof, gesturing to me. "I figure Whimper's got to know where to start looking."

"I've got a few ideas," I said, though I was aware I sounded rather uncertain. "It's possible that we had operations at other C.L.T. facilities. That seems like the most likely place to start."

Dusty nodded. "Okay. Where are those?"

I hesitated before admitting, "I don't know."

Sickle gave an annoyed groan, plates rattling as she thumped her head back against the wall.

"I need to go through the data we got from Paradise Beach. There might be an address list tucked away in there, though I didn't see anything obvious. There's a lot of data, and it didn't look very well-organized."

"Okay," Dusty said. "How long will that take?"

"A quick but thorough skimming should take a few hours, though I might luck out and find something sooner. A thorough digging through the data could take days."

"Boring," Sickle said.

"I'm not even sure it would turn anything up," I said. "I found a few references to other offices, but only referred to by region and name. It looked like all of the shipping from that facility went through their regional office in Baltimore."

Starlight whistled.

“Baltimore,” Dusty echoed. “That’s a long ways off, and I’ve only heard bad things about the swamps around there. Even the caravans don’t try to make that run.”

“What about your home?” Starlight asked. “I mean, wherever you came from before coming to Equestria. Wouldn’t there be something there?”

I slid the final retaining pin into place on the assault rifle, and pulled the charging handle to make sure the weapon cycled properly. It gave a good excuse to cover my hesitation. I barely noticed Dusty’s nod of approval as I set the weapon down again. “...There might be some clues at the hive. I don’t know. I’m worried about what I’d find there.”

Starlight’s ears drooped. “Oh. Yeah.”

I sighed. “But it’s one of two places I can think of that might offer some sort of lead, and it *is* a lot closer than Baltimore.”

“Where?” Dusty asked.

“South,” I replied. “Just inside the Badlands.”

Sickle perked up. “Badlands? That sounds fun.”

Dust had his thinking frown on once again. “How far?”

“Not far. Probably three or four days on hoof.”

Dusty and Starlight looked to each other. Starlight took his lack of objection as consent, floating up her PipBuck to present the map to me. “So, where are we headed?”

I stared at the map for several long seconds before finally reaching up to manipulate the controls, placing a marker on the map. “You know, you might be the first ponies in history to know the location of our hive.”

She set her PipBuck down between us, and we looked over the map. It wasn’t too far away, and a fraction of the distance to Baltimore. It was even shorter than the same trip would have been during the war; a huge expanse of empty wilderness between us and my hive had been under the administration of the Equestrian Army, but they were no longer around to object to us trespassing. It would even lead us through a settlement, one which hadn’t existed during the war.

A different detail had caught Starlight’s attention. She stared at the screen in silence, her eyes narrowed slightly, ears back. She continued to

stare at the screen as she spoke. "Sickle, you seem to know a lot about the raiders around here, right?"

"The ones that I ain't killed yet, yeah." She chuckled quietly to herself, her armor rattling faintly with the movement.

Starlight raised a hoof, stabbing it down at the screen. "There's a mine near the tracks, about halfway between here and your shack. Do you know of a group of raiders based there?"

"Nah," Sickle said with a shrug. "Psycho used to run a gang out of there, but she ran off like a little bitch. She knew what I'd do to her if she ever came back."

"Well there was a bunch of raiders there two weeks ago."

Sickle sat up. Her voice was suddenly serious. "Really?"

"Yeah," Starlight said. "They're the ones who hit Long Haul's caravan, the one we were in."

Dusty grunted, also staring down at the map. A slow smile spread across Sickle's face.

"So I'm thinking," Starlight said, "we go check out Whisper's hive." She poked at the map again. "But we make a little detour along the way."

Dusty nodded. Sickle started to chuckle, a deep and predatory sound. ■

Starlight looked up to me.

It was a potentially dangerous diversion, but I didn't object. "I'm okay with that."

Though I think that may have been a lie. The truth is, I think I was looking forward to it.

Chapter Fifteen

The Pale

We found only bones.

Dusty and Sickle led the way through the compound. He moved smooth and swift, his rifle tracking over any threatening doorways or windows in the cobbled-together buildings. She trotted along, clanking and rattling, as if she owned the place.

The time we had spent in scouting the raider camp, though a reasonable precaution, had been meaningless. There wasn't a single living being within the walls.

I had been the first to see the bones lying within. It was the first time we had taken advantage of my abilities. The ridge above the mine was surrounded by rocky slopes and cliffs, but I simply slipped around to the far side and flew up. I was so close when I peered over the edge that I didn't even need my binoculars to scout the place out. That's when I saw the skeletons scattered around the area.

When I had rejoined the others and passed on what I saw, we decided to move in. The silence of the raider camp was as oppressive as it was unexpected.

But what really confused and concerned us as we passed among the skeletons was the lack of any sign of violence.

Oh, there were signs of death and grotesquery in abundance, as one would expect of a raider camp led by a pony named "Psycho". Skulls and other bones were lashed to the front wall, a caged-in circle in the middle of the yard was stained with blood, and a pair of decaying pony pelts were hung like banners before one of the buildings.

But the skeletal remains showed no obvious signs of violence. Several crows still lingered, but they hopped and flew away lazily, as if largely unconcerned by our presence. They had already picked most of the meat from the bones, and it seemed like their actions were the only reason the skeletons weren't perfectly intact. They looked disturbingly peaceful.

Once we'd ensured that there were no living ponies, we looked closer

at the bodies. Their barding and gear hung loose around their bones. None of the bones were broken. None of the barding was pierced. The ground beneath them wasn't stained with blood. Their weapons lay beside them. Of the two firearms we found, an automatic pipe rifle and a rusty bolt-action, neither had been fired. They had fallen to the ground with full magazines and loaded chambers. It was as if the raiders had simply dropped dead.

So it was all a little unnerving.

We had entered the main building, a crude shack built into the entrance of the mine, when Sickie approached one of the skeletons, cursing. "Fuck. That's got to be Psycho. Some fucker killed that bitch before I could."

I assume she identified the raider by the rather distinctive barding the former-pony had worn. A thick, metal chest-piece had a fan of four spikes across the back, each with a pony skull impaled on it. Another skull had straps bolted onto it, resting loosely above her own skull. A sledgehammer with a blade welded on lay beside her.

We continued on. The raiders' structure extended a fair way into the entrance of the mine, eventually ending with a door, bolted shut on our side. We opened the door to briefly check the other side, then closed and bolted it again. We expected the mines ran much deeper than we cared to explore.

Returning, we did a quick search of the compound. It became immediately apparent that the place hadn't been looted. Sickie accumulated a small stockpile of chems and booze, and we turned up a fair amount of food, water, and even a small stash of caps. It was nothing significant compared to what we already had loaded in our wagon, but it was something.

I have to admit, I found myself just a little disappointed. While I was satisfied that these dangerous raiders had been removed, I had wanted to be a part of that solution. Arriving to find them all dead felt almost as if I had been cheated. It was absurd, I told myself; practically speaking, our objective in coming here had been achieved, one way or another, and it had required no effort or risk on our part.

Emotionally speaking, I recognized that I had sought some form of

retribution, whether for the lives these ponies had taken or the harsh introduction to the Wasteland that they had inflicted upon me. It was unhealthy and unproductive thinking.

Sickle took it a good deal worse, and spent a few minutes kicking at walls, demolishing what had once been Psycho's home.

The rest of us gathered in the courtyard, looking at a few of the skeletons laid out there.

"At least a week," Dusty said, nudging a skull with his hoof. "Maybe longer."

"How'd they die?" Starlight asked from a bit further away.

"I don't know." Dusty circled slowly around the body, looking over the bones. "Maybe it was your alicorn friend."

He hadn't been too happy to hear that we'd first seen the alicorn around here. Our recon had been as much to make sure she wasn't still there as it was to get a tactical appraisal of the raider camp.

Sickle stuck her head out a hole she had kicked in the wall. "Whoever it was, I'm going beat the fuck out of them!" Her head withdrew, followed a moment later by the loud clang and smash of her armored hooves kicking something heavy and metallic.

We moved on as soon as she was finished tearing the place apart. It was already late in the evening, and we wanted to put as much distance between us and that place as we could.



It was early the next day when the questions inevitably began to flow.

"So, what was Appleloosa like during the war?"

I looked up from PipBuck to look over to Starlight. She had lent it to me so I could read through the data we had downloaded from Paradise Beach. Reading while riding in the wagon was a lot easier than reading while walking, but the motion made my head feel fuzzy if I kept at it for too long. I didn't mind the distraction.

"It was nice enough," I said with a shrug. "There were a few thousand ponies living there by the time I moved in, and a good deal of the rail traffic went through the town. The ponies were nice enough, even if there was the occasional tension between them and the buffalo."

"You didn't see much of the war, then?"

I shook my head. "No. I was a long ways away from it. Not my field. Saw the occasional military train come through with troops or tanks, but that's it. The Zebra military never came near Appleloosa. If not for the arms factory, the news, and the visits from the Ministries, it might have been easy to forget there was a war going on."

She slowly nodded. "Sounds kinda nice, yeah."

We continued on, the wagon lightly bouncing as it rolled across the dry earth. Some time later, she asked, "Did you ever meet one of the princesses?"

I actually laughed, though quietly. "Thank goodness, no." To her surprised expression, I explained, "They were ancient and incredibly powerful beings that we didn't entirely understand, and their previous encounters with changelings had been less than ideal. I wouldn't be surprised if they'd developed magic that let them recognize a changeling on sight. I'd rather not take that chance."

Soon, the questions became more like a game. "Okay, favorite pre-apocalypse pastime."

"Hmm... tossup between reading and lazy conversations with friends. ■
I smiled.

"Those holes in your legs. Are they, uh, normal?"

"Yes."

"So all changelings have them? Why?"

"I might as well ask why ponies don't." I shrugged. "We just do."

"Best place in Equestria, before, you know...?"

"I always wanted to see Canterlot. The pictures looked amazing. I'm not sure I'd have the courage for it, though."

Several more casual questions came as we traveled, until she hit one that gave me pause.

"Which princess do you think was better?"

I blinked, taking a moment before replying. "I've seen that question start fights. Though that usually involved alcohol."

She snickered, but stuck to her guns. "You didn't answer the question."

"Not much of an answer to give. Mind, my impression was entirely

second-hoof, but they each seemed like they had their own strengths, and their own flaws. They were both decent, I guess. Just... from a distance.”

She nodded, thinking on that before asking, “Okay, how about the Ministries? You said they visited Appleloosa?”

“Yeah, and I tried to stay as far away from that as possible. Mostly it was the Ministry of Wartime Technology, which wasn’t so bad. I saw the Ministry Mare, Applejack, a few times, though only from a distance. The one that scared me the most was the Ministry of Morale.”

Starlight laughed. “What, the ‘Pinkie Pie is watching you’ Ministry? Yeah, those posters are *still* creepy as hell.”

I sighed. “Oh, wonderful. Of all the things that survived, those had to make it.”

“Lots of posters made it,” she said. “Which is kind of weird, actually. I’ve seen burned out buildings that still had unburnt posters in them. I’ve heard jokes that the ghost of Pinkie Pie goes around putting them up.”

She laughed, until she realized I wasn’t. I was staring off into space, thinking, until she finally spoke up again. “...What?”

I blinked, refocusing. “Sorry. I was just thinking. Miss Pie was a bit of an enigmatic figure. From the stories I’ve heard of her, that story is... just on the edge of plausibility.”

“What?” she repeated, almost stumbling. “Seriously? I just figured ponies were redecorating or something.”

“She was a strange one,” I said. “From what I heard, even her life-long friends couldn’t understand her. I know she had the most peculiar manifestations of earth pony magic, to the point that she would just intuitively *know* things. I’ve heard she discovered an Infiltrator from another hive because she got an *itch*. And she ran Equestria’s counterspying efforts, so we paid a lot of attention to her. Still, we mostly knew old stories and rumors, and I don’t know which ones to believe. Coming back from death as a poster-planting spirit wouldn’t be the strangest thing I’ve heard attributed to her.”

“Wow.” Starlight stared off into space for a moment before shuddering. “Luna, those posters were creepy enough before I knew that.

What if they're true, and she's *still* watching us?!"

Sickle called back. "We'll just have to give the bitch a good show, then."

"Hah, hah," Starlight said, before looking back to me. "So... what kinds of stories did you hear?"

"Plenty. She was a very public figure, helped save Equestria a few times, bore one of the Elements of Harmony, that kind of thing. Many of the stories were historically documented events, while others are just rumors. For example, we'd hear weird rumors, like her being in two places at once or vanishing if you weren't looking right at her, which all seemed impossible, but then we have the stories we know were true, such as how she defeated one of Nightmare Moon's plots by singing and laughing."

"Huh." Starlight walked along in silence for several seconds before speaking again. "So, uh... how exactly does that work?"

I considered that for a few moments. Then I moved a hoof, turning off the PipBuck's screen. "Well..."



A fair portion of the day was spent telling tales of the Ministry Mares, slowly branching out into other celebrities, and even into bits of the war and daily life. Starlight found it surprising to hear that my "pony" job in Appleloosa had been that of a shipping clerk, though after a moment of consideration, she said it was easy to picture me doing that.

Dusty cleverly noted that it let me keep tabs on materials shipped through the area. Even if it was unlikely to be terribly useful information to my hive, such seemingly insignificant details could contribute to a better understanding of complex situations.

All in all, the scattered stories made our travels less tedious, filling the time as we crossed the last of the rougher hills south of Rust, and into the increasingly flat desert beyond.

The next morning, we made our way down the shallow draw of an ancient, dry stream, and emerged into a broad, flat basin. On the far horizon, barely visible in the overcast gloom, was the hazy sight of the hills that marked the edge of the Badlands. Between them and us lay dozens of miles of mostly-flat terrain, all dry earth cluttered with

scattered shrubs.

We caught the glint of metal almost ten minutes before we finally drew near its source. A chain-link fence lay across our path, stretching off to the end of our sight in either direction. It had fallen over in several places. The metal signs attached to it every couple hundred yards or so were all worn and rusted, but the large letters declaring it to be the property of the Equestrian Army were clearly visible, as were the warning of extreme danger and the use of lethal force to prevent trespassing. Fortunately, the warnings were about two hundred years out of date.

Dusty read over the nearby sign as we angled for a gap in the fence. "What is this place?"

"It's an Equestrian Army military testing ground," I said. "The Pale Sands Spell Range."

Dusty's ears pinned back, while Starlight asked, "What did they test here?"

"Megaspells." In what was perhaps a little morbidly dramatic, I added, "This is where Equestria practiced the end of the world."

"I've heard of this place," Dusty said, eyes sweeping along the horizon. "It's supposed to be dangerous. I guess scavengers would go in, hoping to find some old military equipment, and most of them never made it out. Traders avoid the area. Maybe raiders, maybe something worse."

"Probably old military robots," Starlight said.

Sickle merely chuckled. "Sounds good. This trip's been boring as shit."

"Just keep your eyes out," Dusty said. "That includes you, Whisper. I want you glassing the horizon regularly. We might even take advantage of those wings and send you on some recon flights." He looked me over. "The black stands out a bit. Can you shapeshift into something that blends in a bit better?"

"I could," I said, with a tone that made it clear I'd rather not. "But shapeshifting takes a fair amount of energy, and I'm running pretty low. I'd prefer to conserve what little I have left."

Starlight's ears perked up. "You're still low on, er... magic?"

I nodded.

Starlight chewed on her lip a moment. Then she turned, clambering up the side of the wagon beside me. I was about to ask what she was doing when she grabbed me in a tight hug, burying her head beside mine.

I stiffened in surprise, but slowly relaxed, and even chuckled softly as I looped my forelegs around her. "It doesn't quite work that way, but... thank you."

"Try making out!" Sickle called back. "Some good fucking should get the love flowing."

"And it *definitely* doesn't work that way!" I replied as Starlight drew back, trying to hide a blush.

"Sorry," Starlight said. "I just, you know... I don't want you to starve or anything."

"I appreciate it," I said, offering a smile. "Though that concern for my health should do enough on its own. I won't be able to do much magic, but at least I can survive off what I'm getting from you and Sickle."

Her head drew back with an expression of skepticism that bordered on distaste, as if the thought itself was going to dirty her. "Sickle?"

I shrugged and sighed. "Yeah. For some reason, she likes me now. Go figure."

"Huh." Starlight looked at the heavily armored mare ahead of us. "Guess you impressed her with that fight near Mareford."

"Oh, yeah," Sickle said. "I'm all super impressed with how she shot a bunch of ponies in the back like a cowardly little bitch. Woo."

Starlight frowned. "Or she's an erratic psychopath, and we shouldn't bother trying to figure out what she likes."

"Oh, that's easy," Sickle replied. "I like long romantic walks in the desert. And ice cream."

Even though I found her sarcasm distasteful, a reply came to mind that I couldn't resist. "And pineapple."

"Fuck yeah," Sickle said, and though she didn't look back, I had no doubt she was grinning. "Pineapple is awesome."

Even Starlight chuckled a bit at that, though she made a visible effort

to resist. She quickly tried to turn back the subject. "So, is that why you haven't shapeshifted? I thought you'd want to look like a normal pony in case we came across anypony."

"I'm just conserving my energy," I said. "I'll change before we meet anypony, but for now I'll take advantage of no longer needing to hide myself from you." I reached up with a hoof, pulling at the edge of my new attire. "Though I'm glad I got this cloak to conceal myself with. After so many years of hiding what I am, I'm feeling a *little* bit exposed."

She slowly nodded. "Still... if you're that, um, hungry, isn't there anything we can do?"

"A vacation might help," I said, smiling a little, then shrugged. "Otherwise, not really. Time together should do enough. Anything else would be... either manipulative or unpleasant."

"How so?"

I frowned a little, but I didn't allow my hesitation with the subject to keep me silent. "Manipulative would be trying to steer a conversation toward a topic that would draw out feelings of love for something or somepony, which would let me feed on it. Something like... your mother." Her ears flicked back. "Unpleasant would be... *forcefully* feeding. It's a practice my hive frowns upon in all but the most dire circumstances. It basically amounts to reaching in and pulling out a pony's magic, but it's... unpleasant is probably insufficient. It's emotionally torturous on the pony. It's literally ripping the love out of them."

Starlight's sat there, silently, as her gaze lowered to our hooves, meandering around for a few moments before fixing on her PipBuck, laid before us. She got up to move, but rather than leaving, she sidled up and lay beside me, close enough that her soft coat brushed against my carapace.

One forehoof reached out, lightly brushing against the PipBuck's case. "My mother inherited this from her own mother," she said, her voice quiet. "It's been passed down from mother to daughter, ever since my great, great grandmother left Stable 63. Each of them left diaries and notes and recordings. The map is dotted with markers showing where they've been. Some nights, my mom and I would sit down, and she'd read some of her mother's stories to me, or we'd listen to some of

the music on it, or...”

She paused, then pulled out a set of earbuds in her magic. One end plugged into the PipBuck. The two earbuds floated between us, with one offered to me. I accepted it, and we each slipped our respective earbud into an ear.

Starlight flicked through the menus, then hit play. I recognized the music with the first few notes, even before Sweetie Belle started to sing. It was one of her more recent pieces, slow and soft in tone, but full of emotion. I don’t remember the words, but I remember the tune, and I remember the feelings. There was sadness and worry, but also a sense of hope that made the song beautiful to my ears. To hear it now, as clear and perfect as the song had been two centuries ago, was wonderfully surreal, as if that time was truly as recent as my own memories made it seem.

That hope carried a bittersweet undertone when I realized that she had probably died along with the millions of other ponies who had perished in the apocalypse. Even if her position in Stable-Tec had allowed her to survive the megaspells, she would have still died well over a century ago.

The song ended, and Starlight took a deep breath, slowly letting it out. Her eyes were watering. “There’s a bunch of faster paced songs I really like, but this one’s always been my favorite. My mom would play it for me any time I asked, or even just to cheer me up. I... haven’t listened to it since she died.”

A moment later she was tapping the buttons again, navigating through the directories. One was a list of names. I only recognized the last two, Starlight and Midnight. Above them were Nova, Firelight, and Dusk. She selected Midnight. A list of files appeared, sorted by date. She opened the first file, twenty-something years old.

The voice that came across the earbud was almost indistinguishable from Starlight. Midnight’s voice was thick with emotion, as if she had been crying recently, though she spoke with a sure confidence.

“I don’t know who you are, yet. I don’t know what I’ll name you, or what you’re like. I just... I just know that I love you, and I can’t wait to get to know you...”

The recording ended, and Starlight sniffled. “She recorded that three years before I was born. It’s like... she knew...”

There was so much love. There was even a strong undercurrent of affection for me. But, even though I couldn’t sense it the same way I could sense love, I knew there was also a great sadness. I reached up a foreleg, slipping it around her shoulders, and gave a firm squeeze. She was enduring some very strong emotions for my sake.

She leaned into the hug, then wiped at her eyes. “Were... were you close with Ephema?”

“Not as close as you were with your own mother, I think. Our duties kept us apart, and there were so many of us for her to care for.” I gave a weak smile. “But I loved her, and I know she loved us. She always found little ways to show it.”

I blinked, finding that I had teared up a little at the memory.

Starlight noticed, too, and nudged me lightly with her shoulders. “Hey, don’t cry. Creepy bug-monsters shouldn’t cry.” She smiled, a fragile smile that betrayed a fear that I wouldn’t appreciate the joke.

I chuckled softly, and she relaxed. “Hey, now,” I said, smiling. “If you think I’m all weird and creepy, imagine what it was like for me coming to Equestria. All you ponies, with your squishy hides and garish colors. And hair, hair *everywhere*, getting into *everything*. It was a nightmare!”

She giggled, wiping at her eyes again. “Okay, the hair can be a little annoying at times. But hey, we’re not *all* garish!”

“True,” I said, giving another squeeze before releasing her. “You’re a rather soothing shade of dark blue. It’s a lot better than all the pinks and purples and rainbows everywhere.”

“Hey!” Sickie called back. “The fuck is wrong with pink?”

“It was a bit excessive,” I said. “Though I guess it’s not quite as ever-present now as it was back then.”

“There’s nothing wrong with pink,” Sickie grumbled. “Sides, all the best parts are pink.”

“Ignoring that,” Starlight said before nudging me again. “I guess you’ve got a kind of cool black and armored look going for you.” Her smile faltered. “Though it kinda reminds me of those Enclave goons.

Er, no offense.”

I shook my head. “Glossy black and solidly colored eyes? Yeah, I understand what you mean. In fact, I heard rumors that the pegasus power armor was inspired by changelings. There was some talk that Rainbow Dash had some sort of fascination with changelings, for better or worse, which might have influenced their design. They were a collaboration between the Ministries of Awesome and Image.”

Starlight tilted her head, looking curiously at me. “Fascination, huh?”

“Yeah. Depending on the rumor you listened to, she was either fascinated with our ability to shapeshift for personal reasons, focused on practicality and our possible utility as spies for Equestria, or secretly wanted to exterminate our entire species. I have no clue which, if any, was true.”

“Huh.” She looked down at my chest, then reached out and prodded me. Naturally, my hard outer shell didn’t give like flesh would. “So... is that like armor, then? How much protection does it give?”

“Not as much as I’d like,” I said, giving a wry smile. “That wasn’t so much of a concern in the past, but given the amount of firefights I’ve gotten in since waking up here, I think my priorities have changed.” I tapped my own hoof against my chest, producing a soft clapping sound. “A changeling’s exoskeleton is good protection against minor cuts, abrasions, and bruises, but that’s about it. It might help a little if somepony tries to kick me, but I don’t think it’d even slow down a bullet.”

Starlight blinked, a hint of unease coloring her expression. “Exoskeleton. That’s... just weird.”

“It’s just as weird going the other way,” I said, chuckling a little. “I remember the first time I took an endoskeletal form. I was... four, I think. I freaked out. It was weird enough feeling parts *jiggling* every time I moved. Somehow, I got this absurd idea that I’d messed up my transformation and I was melting. But the weirdest part? Feeling the bones inside me. I could press against the squishy, possibly melting parts and feel something *solid* under them, moving along with me. That freaked me out, like there was some alien *thing* inside my body, trying to tear its way out. I had nightmares for a week!”

Starlight responded to my childhood trauma by falling back against the heap of supplies and laughing. To be fair, I chuckled a bit at my own expense, as well.

Her laughter faded, eventually ending in a long sigh. “Ahhhhh... that’s kinda creepy.”

I gave another chuckle and shrugged. “You get used to some weirdness when you can change shape at will.”

Lying on her back, Starlight stared up at the gray, overcast sky, lost in thought for a moment. “I could see advantages to that.”

After a moment of silence, I added a bit more to my story. “The other reason I remember that whole event was because of Ephema. She took the time to comfort me, to assure me that everything was okay. She must have had many other responsibilities that she needed to attend to, but she made the time to care for me.”

Starlight smiled, still looking up at the clouds.

The silence lingered on for several seconds before Dusty spoke up. “I really hate to be that guy and break up the mood, but if Star’s right about the robots, we need to keep an eye out.”

Starlight groaned. “Dusty...”

“No, he’s right,” I said. “Duty first.” I gave her a smile. “We can always talk more later.”

She sighed, but relented. She stood and moved to the edge of the wagon, but I raised a hoof to stop her before she hopped off. “Starlight,” I said, keeping my voice low. “Thank you for what you did, but... I can live off what I’ve been able to get. You don’t need to hurt yourself just to help me.”

She hesitated, finally shrugging. “It’s nothing. I just wanted to help.”

I watched her fidget for a couple seconds before giving her a soft smile—which, in retrospect, was probably not quite as effective with my natural set of teeth. “Well, I do appreciate it, so... thank you.”

She wavered a moment before replying, “Hey, that’s what friends are for, right?”

My smile grew, and she flashed a smile my way before hopping down. ■

I sat back in the wagon, lifting my binoculars, and scanned the

horizon.



“About twenty to twenty five structures in total. Looks like a lot of houses, a store, a rail depot with no rails, and a large power substation. Looks to be in very good condition, no scrap-building or other signs of modification.”

Dusty squinted through his own binoculars as he took in my report. “And the ponies?”

“Still haven’t moved,” I said. The figures stood by the buildings a few miles away, too far for me to make out details even with my binoculars, especially with the dim morning light struggling to pierce the cloud-cover. “I count at least fifteen scattered around in loose gatherings, but they’re not doing anything.” I lowered my binoculars. “I think they’re fake.”

Starlight peered down her scope, her Lancer resting across the side of the wagon. “Could be military robots, just standing guard?”

“Possible,” I said, and scanned across the town again. “I’m not aware of any pony-form robots, but that wouldn’t preclude some experimental line developed in secret.” I swept my view over, out of town. A ring of dirt tracks surrounded the strip of buildings, built on either side of a paved road. That road ended at the edge of the town. A single dirt road met it, stretching off into the distance alongside a set of power lines. Other than that one line, the tight cluster of buildings stood isolated, like an island in the middle of an ocean. I focused again on a lone sign at the edge of town, the letters just barely too small to read at that distance.

It had been about twenty four hours since we passed the fence on the edge of the Pale Sands Spell Range, and that tiny, lonely town was the first indication we had seen that ponies had ever been here.

“Soooo...” Starlight glanced over to Dusty and me. “Should we check it out?”

“Could be dangerous,” Dusty said. “We’ve already got a goal, I’d rather not take risky side-trips.”

“Pussy,” Sickie growled.

“Look at the size of that power station,” Starlight said. “I’ve seen factories with smaller stations. What does a little town like that need with so much power?” She paused, thinking. “Could be a Stable.”

“Stables have their own power source,” I said, focusing on the substation. “Still, that *is* a big substation. Could be something. I don’t think it’d hurt to look a bit closer, get a better idea of what the place is. Because the only thing I can tell from here is that it’s *not* just a normal little village.”

Dusty thought a moment before shrugging. “If you don’t mind the delay, sure. There’s a small rise just to the right, probably half a mile out from town. We’ll glass it from there, see how it looks. Unless we see something juicy, I’d recommend steering clear. This has all sorts of wrong written all over it.”

Sickle grumbled something under her breath, no doubt complaining once again about our cautiousness, but continued on all the same.

We were about halfway to the rise when I could finally read the sign, despite the jostling of the wagon. I read it out loud. “Welcome to Ponytown. Population: 98.”

“Just a random town of ninety eight out in the middle of the desert,” Starlight said.

“With a rail station that has no rails,” I added.

I could see that the structures had once been garishly painted, much like the welcome sign, though the years had faded the colors badly. The pony-shaped figures gathered around outside them remained unmoving.

Between the buildings, I could see glimpses of multiple skywagons along the street, and even a few motorwagons. Their bright paint had held up better than that of the buildings.

It wasn’t long before we reached the small rise Dusty had indicated. I gave one final scan to confirm what I had seen before lowering my binoculars. “They’re not robots. They’re mannequins, and they’ve probably been there since the war.”

Starlight cast a glance my way before peering down her scope again. “Why would anypony build a town in the middle of the desert and stick a bunch of—”

"It's a test site," I said, and she glanced at me again.

"A test site? What would they test—"

She abruptly halted, blanching, and finally returned to her scope. "Well, that's..."

We both looked over the array of figures we could see. The fancy, upscale, but faded houses had many pony figures visible. The nearest group, gathered in a back yard with a very out-of-place picket fence, looked like a large family, including a few colts and fillies. Almost all of the adults wore clothes of varying types, mostly reduced to tatters by the years of weather. The foals were posed as if playing, forever frozen in place.

"...extremely creepy," Starlight finished.

"So, no secret military lab or valuable loot," Dusty noted.

"No secret military lab," I agreed, but then continued on. "Possibly loot, though. I saw a film about their megaspell testing, something the Ministry of Image put together to reassure the public. They made the test villages as close to life as possible, stocked up with food and all. There should be everything you'd expect in a real town, and I don't see any signs of looting."

Starlight murmured quietly as she slowly panned her scope around the place. "Doesn't look like anypony's touched it since the war."

I nodded, then raised a hoof to point. "But what's really got my attention are those motorwagons. They look to be in good condition, and there are several to salvage parts from."

Even Dusty's ears perked up at that, and he spent some time gazing through his binoculars at them. "...Would certainly be convenient," he finally said, then nodded. "Okay. Leave the wagon here, and we'll check it out. Just keep an eye out. There's got to be some reason this place hasn't been hit for salvage, and I doubt that reason is rumors and the remote location."

Sickle unhitched herself, following after Dusty. As for myself, I decided to err on the side of caution. I flashed over in green fire as I expended some of the love Starlight had shared with me to retake my Whisper Winds disguise, and quickly followed along with the others. While we had no idea what was waiting for us in that town, I didn't

want to take any chances of being discovered.

Besides, I find handling and aiming a weapon to be easier when it's held in my teeth rather than floating freely beside me, and fangs get in the way of that. Not that I'm a great shot to begin with, but I could use every advantage I could get.

We made it to the edge of the little town without incident. Our path led us past the group of mannequins we had been eying before, gathered together as if enjoying a backyard picnic. Faded and decayed clothes rustled faintly in the breeze, while the fake ponies on display held eternal smiles, oblivious of the fate that had been intended for them.

Our destination was one of the motorwagons, painted in a cherry red that was only moderately faded and pitted with time. It was parked under an awning on a small strip of concrete beside the fake family's house. Dusty moved by it, sweeping his weapon around to cover corners as he passed them, until he could scan around the street in front of the house.

Sickle followed behind him, but had slowed notably. Her head twitched this way and that as she looked around, and she growled quietly. "I don't like it. Something ain't right with this shit."

Starlight moved up to the side window of the house and peered through, first over the sights of her Repeater, then leaning in for a closer look. A moment later, she gave a low whistle. "That is the most thoroughly stocked kitchen I've seen in my entire life."

Through the window, I could see that the inside of the houses had endured much better than the outside. It looked like a cushy and lavishly stocked suburban home. The colors had remained more vivid in the shade of the interior, with their cheerfulness diminished only slightly by the thick coating of dust over everything. Beyond the kitchen, I could see a table with several mannequins sitting around it, posed as if sharing a family meal.

"Check the motorwagon," Dusty said, crouching at the front of the vehicle. "See if it runs, or if we can fix it up."

"On it," Starlight said, holstering her Repeater again as she scrambled up into the driver's position.

I had moved up near Dusty, until he told me to watch our rear.

I followed his directions, moving to the rear of the motorwagon and watching the back sides of the neighboring buildings. Sickie remained near him, her tail flicking in agitation as she muttered. "Something's seriously fucked here..."

"Well, the motorwagon doesn't start," Starlight said. "Might be out of charge, or something might have come loose. Let me see."

She climbed over the top of the vehicle to the motor, and as much as I wanted to watch her work, I kept my eyes out for danger.

It was just moments later that we heard the sound, low and distant.

I had previously described the sound of a minigun firing at us as the most terrifying sound I had ever heard, and while I would still consider that to be true, I would point out that there are different kinds of terror. That had been the visceral terror of overwhelming power and impending death tearing through the air around me.

This was different. This low sound was almost inaudible at first as it filtered across the distance to us, but it grew steadily, almost impossibly, in both pitch and volume. The banshee wail of the air raid siren echoed across the basin, a creeping terror that conjured up the worst nightmares of your own imagination. The hairs of my disguised form stood on end.

"Well that isn't good," Dusty muttered, before speaking up. "Stay alert. Starlight, how—shit!"

My head snapped around to see Dusty rise and take a step back, bringing his rifle up; a pure-white earth pony had stepped out from the house across the street, staring at us.

I immediately realized that something was wrong with this pony. I paid a lot of attention to the fine details of appearance, and my eyes went straight toward the oddities. It wasn't just her coat that was white. What flesh I could see was almost entirely devoid of color, with only the faintest suggestion of pink. Her eyes were pink. I recognized the signs of albinism, but the oddity didn't stop there.

Her eyes were fully dilated, and even as she stared at us, they seemed unfocused. While her coat was perfect, her pale-pink mane and tail were thin and limp. She had come to a halt and wavered, as I'd expect of a pony abruptly coming face-to-face with a rifle-armed soldier, but I could see no sign of fear, or even comprehension.

Then those pink eyes narrowed. Her scraggly mane and tail flicked about as if caught in some unfelt breeze. Then she opened her mouth, and as she let out an unearthly shriek of rage, her mane and tail burst into flame, and she charged.

She only made it to the edge of the street when Dusty's rifle hammered twice at my ears. At least one bullet, if not both, found their mark, and the pony tumbled to the ground. She squirmed about for a moment until a third bullet took off part of her head, and the flames flickered out.

"What the *fuck?!?*" Sickle bellowed.

Past the echoing sound of Dusty's gunshots, I could hear more shrieks.

Dusty shouted back to us. "Whisper! Get airborne, see what's coming down on us! Star! Get—"

I missed the rest of what he said as I transformed. Rather than discard my disguise, I hastily added a pair of wings to my current form, threw back my cloak, and launched myself up into the air.

It's amazing just how much your perception can change with a little bit of elevation. From just above the rooftop, I could see the whole settlement. Several more white ponies were emerging from various buildings, with the same flaming-albino look as the first. None carried arms or armor. I figured Sickle could likely take them all on herself.

My elevated point of view also changed my perception of the area around the town. That little bit of height was enough for all the scrub and subtle rolling of the terrain to fall beneath me, giving me a clear view of the basin in every direction. Without those in the way, I could see the distant white forms milling about, roughly a mile past the little town.

I raised my binoculars to quickly scope out the distant forms, in case they should pose some risk to us.

There were dozens of them, milling about in agitation around an open-girder tower, maybe a hundred feet tall. For a moment, I thought it might have been an antenna, only without any lines attached to it. Then I thought it might be a water tower with an unusually narrow tank.

Then I caught the faint, sickly colors that slowly twisted and

churned within the upper confines of the tower.

My stomach dropped, a chill flooding through my veins.

I landed heavily atop the motorwagon, making Starlight jump in surprise. "Run!"

Dusty didn't question me as he drew back. "Move, now! Go!"

"Oh for fuck's sake," Sickle growled, throwing a pill bottle back into her saddlebag.

"Damnit!" Starlight snapped as she hopped down, trotting toward the rear of the vehicle. "I can fix it!"

"Go!" Dusty repeated, breaking into a trot.

"Run!" I shouted as I galloped past them, only slowing to shout back. "The megaspell they were going to test, it's still here!"

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me!" Sickle growled as she broke out into a full gallop; while her loping pace looked slow and heavy, her huge stride ate up the distance. The others cursed and followed her, fleeing the little town. I soon had to take flight to keep up, even with Starlight and Dusty pausing to turn and shoot at the ponies who gave chase.

Past the clanking and crashing of Sickle's armor, the echoing air-raid siren slowly wound down to silence. We kept going.

I skimmed the ground, staying low and agonizingly slow as I kept pace with the others, despite how much I wanted to flee as fast as possible.

By the time we reached the wagon, the albino ponies had stopped chasing us. Sickle was slowing down, panting hard, and both Dusty and Starlight were looking winded.

Dusty called out. "Sickle! Grab the wagon!"

"Fuck... the wagon!" Sickle shouted back, running right past it. Dusty swore and turned, galloping over to the wagon and quickly strapping himself in.

"Whisper!" He called out, and I darted over to hover beside him. "How big of a blast do those things make? How far away do we need to get?"

He was already pulling the wagon along before I could answer, quickly reaching a rapid trot, and I flew along beside him. "Depends

on the design of the megaspell. I only know vague generalizations, not firm—”

“That’ll do!”

“The rough estimates I heard for a city-killing balefire megaspell were one mile for near-total destruction and death, two miles for serious destruction and casualties, and four miles for minor damage and injury.”

“Shit.” He urged himself onward, picking up the pace. I looped back and pushed against the back of the wagon to help; I had wingpower just going to waste, after all.

“If you see a flash, hit the dirt and cover up!” I called out. “The megaspell was a mile past the town. This far out, we might avoid serious injury if we’re not directly exposed!”

We continued on, though our pace was rapidly flagging. We made it barely a mile from town before exhaustion started to really kick in from our rapid retreat. Sickie had started to trail behind Starlight, while Dusty and I took up the rear. Starlight paused at a dry streambed for us to catch up. Sickie simply collapsed inside the shallow ravine, and Dusty and I soon followed.

“Catch your breath,” Dusty said, panting. “Sixty seconds, then we’re moving out at a trot.”

There were a few weak grumbles, but we all wanted to get as far away from the megaspell as possible.

Sickie dug out an inhaler, and practically tore off her muzzle before taking a hit. The effect was immediate, and while she was still panting hard, she went from slack and exhausted to tense and ready to go. Then the pill bottle came out again, and she downed a pair of tablets. By the time everyone else was getting up again, she had pulled out a second inhaler, took another draw, and threw it away. “Okay, let’s fucking do this already!”

Dusty went back to the wagon, but Sickie shoved him to the ground, snarling. “Give me that, you pussy ass bitch!” As Dusty picked himself up again, Sickie quickly threw on the harness and muscled the wagon across the streambed, nearly tipping it over in the process. Her helmet’s muzzle, still open, bounced and slapped against the side of her head.

I trotted alongside Dusty and Starlight, and Sickie broke out into a full-speed, loping gallop.

"Slow down!" Dusty shouted out.

"Fuck you!" Sickie shouted back. "Get your weak ass in the cart if you can't fucking keep up!"

We broke into weary gallops as well in an attempt to catch up, but Sickie didn't slow down for us to catch up. In annoyance, I took to the air again, looping my forelegs around Starlight's chest—much to her surprise!—and ferrying her to the wagon. I returned to do the same for Dusty, depositing him beside Starlight, and then landed beside both of them. I figured if Sickie was going to be that way, she could carry me, too.

As it was, I had to clutch the side of the wagon to keep from bouncing out as Sickie galloped along much more quickly than the wagon or its occupants were happy with.

Starlight lay on her side in the bouncing wagon, panting. "Okay. Pegasus Whisper is handy."

"Flying has its advantages," I agreed, while seriously considering taking to the air and flying along beside the wagon just to be spared the rough ride. "Feathers suck, though."

She gave a weak chuckle, then groaned. "I fucking hate ferals. And what the heck was with them, anyway?"

"Hell if I know," Dusty replied, holding onto the edge of the wagon as he watched behind us. "They sure acted like ghouls, but I've never seen ones like those."

"Wait," I said, spreading my wings for balance. "Ferals? Ghouls?"

Starlight propped herself up against a row of ammunition cases. "Yeah, you know—"

She stopped, and blinked. "...Right, you don't know. Of course." She looked over to Dusty. "Hell, I don't even know where to start."

Dusty took over for her. "Ghouls are ponies that died and came back to life because of magical radiation," he said. "Some keep their minds. Ferals are the ones who didn't. They're more like animals than ponies, now."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Died and..." It suddenly clicked. "Bale-

fire is necromantic in origin. Huh. That always conjured up images of zombie ponies, but I never imagined that would actually happen.”

Dusty gave a weak snort of laughter. “Yeah, don’t call a ghoul that. Never seen one who liked that name.”

“Really?” I asked, finding the peculiar pedantry even more bizarre than the idea of balefire-animated undead. “Of the two, *ghoul* is the less offensive?”

“Hey, I didn’t make the rules,” Dusty said. “Though, fair warning? Most ghouls look pretty badly decayed, like they rotted for a few days before coming back. Those ones back there were weird. I’ve heard of a few different kinds of ghouls, before, but never ones like that.”

“Why the difference?”

Dusty shrugged. “Hell if I know.”

The wagon bounced clear of the ground, eliciting a yelp from Starlight. I caught air, beating my wings a couple times before landing atop it once more. Dusty turned and yelled. “Damn it, Sickle! Slow down! You’re going to break a wheel at this rate!”

Sickle’s only reply was the growling tone her panting took on.

Dusty muttered, turning around to look back. I continued to watch Sickle. The plates on her back shifted and clanked with every stride, like an old, rickety, yet powerful machine. We hit another bump, jostling us all around, and I ended up sprawling against Starlight, who spent the next few moments cursing at Sickle.

I sat up, clutching to the side of the wagon once more. “She’s got to slow down sooner or later.”

“Sure,” Starlight said, shoving away a small heap of guns that had slid up against her. “I give her a couple more minutes before the drugs wear off, and she just passes out and eats dirt.”

I settled in again, as best I could with unsecured cargo randomly assaulting me. Eventually I looked back.

Dusty was looking behind us with the binoculars. His ears had perked up alertly, but then drooped down. He lowered his binoculars, continuing to stare off into space.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He turned to me, his expression hardening in an instant. “You two

are cursed, aren't you?" He looked to Starlight. "Like, literally cursed. That's what this is, isn't it?"

Starlight frowned. "The heck are you talking about, Dusty?"

"I'm talking about running into some weird new pyrotechnic ghouls, getting chased off by a megaspell of all things..." He pointed a hoof back toward the horizon. "And now your damn alicorn friend is back!"

Starlight sat bolt upright, despite the shaking of the wagon. I balanced with my wings as I raised my own binoculars, searching in the direction Dusty had pointed. The jostling made it difficult, but I soon caught a few shaky glimpses of a purple form banking slowly around. She was circling the town we had just left. Searching.

I lowered my binoculars. "Okay. Running into her at Paradise Beach could have been a coincidence. Showing up here, now? Yeah, that's suspicious."

"Damn right it's suspicious," Dusty said. "What the hell did you two do?"

"Hey!" Starlight shouted, bracing as the wagon lurched again. "We didn't do anything!"

"Then why the hell is it following us?"

"I don't know, Dusty! What do you—"

It was at that moment that Starlight's earlier prediction came true.

I wasn't looking in Sickie's direction, so I didn't see if she wavered, sagged, or gave any other sign of exhaustion before simply collapsing. My first knowledge of the event came when the wagon abruptly and violently upended, hurtling me into the air. I tumbled, only barely able to reorient myself with those clumsy pegasus wings in time to save myself from impacting the ground.

The rest of the wagon's occupants hadn't been so lucky. Sickie had collapsed, and her weight had born one of the leading poles of the wagon into the ground. Momentum had done the rest as it sent the cart tumbling, throwing its contents across the ground. Unfortunately, those contents were Dusty, Starlight, and several hundred pounds of unsecured equipment.

The crash was already over by the time I had gotten under control. A few boxes were still tumbling along the ground amidst a cloud of

dust. Starlight and Dusty both groaned—until Starlight moved, and the groan turned into a sharp yell of pain.

I darted over, landing beside her as she rolled onto her back, cradling a foreleg against her chest. She grit her teeth against the pain, hissing and grunting.

“Starlight?” I said, her eyes opening to a sliver at the sound of her name. “Are you okay?”

She grimaced, closing her eyes again for a moment, and winced once more as she moved her leg. She practically growled past her clenched teeth. “I think it’s broken.”

“Are you sure?”

She hesitated, then lifted her leg a fraction of an inch. She immediately hissed in pain. “Yep!” She laid her leg down again, taking a couple deep breaths. “Hooo... yeah, pretty sure.”

Dusty had gotten up by then, and hobbled over on three legs. The fourth was held to his side. He grunted as he sat beside her, then held out a hoof near hers. “Let me see.”

Again, she hesitated, then slowly moved her other leg away. Though he was clearly in pain himself, he carefully touched along the length of Starlight’s leg, eliciting a hiss of pain each time. I stood back and watched, feeling useless.

“Yeah,” Dusty said, sitting back and cradling his side again. “Seems like a pretty clean break. Hey, Whisper? See if you can find where the medical kit went, dig up a splint.”

Starlight cursed under her breath, frowning down at her leg.

By the time I had found where the medical supplies had ended up and found a splint within the disorganized mess within, Dusty had gotten Starlight’s saddlebags off and was digging out a healing potion.

I handed over the splint, then sat beside Starlight as Dusty carefully lifted Starlight’s leg. She grit her teeth, but bore the pain well, and moments later she relaxed again as he set the limb down across the splint’s bindings. I placed a hoof gently on her shoulder.

She winced again as Dusty tightened the bindings, lashing the splint onto her leg. As he did so, he spoke to me. “Whisper, what’s that alicorn doing?”

I twitched in alarm, and quickly turned around. I scanned along the horizon and the sky just above it, both by eye and with my binoculars.

"I don't see her."

"At least she isn't coming this way," Dusty muttered as he continued to work. Tightening the last strap, he had Starlight lift her leg. She did so, and without any fresh shocks of pain. Satisfied, Dusty passed over the healing potion. "Drink this. It should heal the bone up, but it might be weak for a while. Keep the splint on and stay off that leg for now until—"

"I know, I know." She downed the healing potion in one quick gulp, then set the bottle down again. "Don't want to break it again while it's weak and all that." Then, almost apologetically, she added, "Thanks."

Dusty nodded. A silence grew between us until, several seconds later, Dusty finally spoke again. "I suppose we should check on Sickie."

Starlight answered with an unenthusiastic grunt as she stood up, balancing on three legs. I had offered a hoof to help her, but she was determined to do it on her own.

Sickie lay where she had fallen, still harnessed to the wagon. The limp sprawl would have looked like she had simply dropped dead, if not for her sides moving with her shallow, rapid breathing. Frothy spittle clung to her lips and chin, making her look more like a rabid beast. Her eyes were half-open, staring vacantly from behind the slits of her helm. One of the wagon poles lay beneath her, broken from the crash.

Dusty stared down at her for several seconds before looking up to us again. "And this, my little ponies, is why you don't abuse combat drugs."

One of Sickie's legs shifted a few inches, and she emitted a quiet string of mostly incoherent sounds. The only word I caught was "Cunt".

Starlight snorted and walked past her, muttering. "Dumb bitch." Sickie replied with another incoherent mumble.

Sitting beside Sickie, Dusty placed a hoof atop her helmet. "You okay in there?"

More mumbles. A foreleg dragged its way across the ground to her head, but lacked the strength to do any more.

“You’re lucky you didn’t give yourself a heart attack or a stroke or something,” Dusty said, reaching over to Sickle’s armored saddlebags. That finally provoked a bit more of a reaction from her as she twisted around, grabbing at his leg. He drew it back just in time, then scowled down at her. “Relax. I’m just getting a healing potion for you.”

“M fine,” she mumbled, slowly relaxing again. Her twisting around left her sprawled on her back and even more tangled up.

“You just ran until the drugs couldn’t keep you going,” Dusty said. “Last pony I saw do that blew his heart up.”

“Fuck tha’,” she said between pants, laying her head back until the helm’s horn dug into the ground. “Spensive shit. ‘M fine.”

Dusty sighed, frowning down at her.

A short distance away, Starlight was starting to gather our scattered supplies. She might have been down a hoof, for the time being, but that didn’t affect her magic. I helped her, gathering up scattered ammo cases, bundles of tarps, and guns.

Dusty eventually fed Sickle one of his own healing potions to get around her protests. She remained lying there for several minutes as we gathered things up. He coaxed her to get up so he could get her unstrapped from the wagon, though she wavered drunkenly as she did so. Once freed, she staggered off for a few steps before sitting down heavily. Her head wavered from side to side, as if unable to properly focus. She soon gave up and flopped down on her side once more.

The wagon was salvageable. The back right wheel had broken off at the axle, and one of the two harness poles—I’m sure they have a name, I simply haven’t encountered it before—was broken in half. The other wheels were fine, and while Dusty said the pivot point for the front wheels was bent, it was still functional. He reasoned that, with the proper load balance and a bit of effort, the wagon should work. For now.

The sound of Sickle’s saddlebags opening drew our attention. Dusty immediately dropped what he was doing and trotted up to her. “Oh, no,” he said, a hoof reaching out to stop the pill bottle she just pulled out. “No more drugs. The last thing—”

Sickle came to life. Her other leg lashed out, catching Dusty around

the neck, and carried him in an arc over her prone form and into the ground beyond. She was instantly on top of him, spittle flying from her lips as she roared. "Listen here, you little fucking shitstain!"

Starlight and I both shouted out objections as we rushed over to help, but Sickie ignored us. She jammed a hoof in Dusty's face, leg-blades hovering over his eyes. "You don't fucking tell me what I can and can't do, bitch! You can, can *ask*, and if I... uh..."

She wobbled, then went completely limp, collapsing face-first into the dirt and flopping onto her side.

Dusty groaned, half beneath her. "Damnit, Sickie," he grumbled, shoving at her side to little effect.

We went to help roll her off of him. A moment later she moved, her head rolling to the side—then suddenly exploded into motion again, her legs kicking out defensively as she let out an incoherent, babbling yell. Just as quick as it came, she stopped, frozen in place and panting. Inside her helm, I could see the flickering reflection of her eyes blinking. "W-wha...?"

I had to admire Dusty's patience and self control. "Sickie?" he asked, reaching up to place a hoof on the side of her helm.

She seemed to have trouble focusing on him, given the way her head continued to wobble and tilt even with his assistance. "...Dusty?"

He nodded. "Do you remember where you are?"

"I was... in a maze..." She slowly looked around, expression slack. "...We're in the desert." Then she focused on him again. "Were we fucking?"

Dusty gave a snort. "No, we weren't. Could you get off me?"

"Yeah," she said, rolling over to sprawl on her back once more. The lingering effects of her brief unconsciousness quickly faded, and when she lifted her head again, she didn't wobble any. "I was about to kick your ass, wasn't I?"

Dusty rose to his hooves, once again holding one leg against his side. "You just passed out because the accelerants you were using wore off, and your body couldn't keep up with the strain. The healing potion will help with any muscle or circulatory damage it caused, but you should probably take it easy for a bit."

She raised her forehooves to her face. I saw her bare her teeth for a moment, as if angry once more at being told what to do, but she soon relaxed. "Urgh. A nap *is* sounding kinda good right now..."

"Go ahead and grab a spot in the wagon," Dusty said.

We helped her into the wagon, getting her situated in the front left to counter-balance for the missing wheel. She flopped down limply, her head resting across the edge of the wagon. The rest of the wagon's contents were loaded around her, and Dusty took the time to get things tied down as best he could, despite giving a wince of pain every time he twisted.

Once everything was loaded, he walked over to the front of the cart, with the harness hanging from the single pole. "Well this is going to be a pain in the ass," he said, reaching for it.

I stopped his hoof with my own. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. When I gave him a flat glare, he rolled his eyes. "I landed on a box of rations. I might have cracked a rib, but I don't think so. I'll be fine."

"You should get a healing potion and some rest," I said.

He shook his head. "I'm not using a healing potion for every little injury. I want to save them for emergency use."

"We've got plenty of caps to buy more potions when we find them, and we'll still have plenty for emergencies. And, speaking of emergencies, we'll need you in good shape if we run into any trouble."

He eyed me a moment, chewing on the inside of his cheek, but finally nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I'll take a potion."

He reached out for the harness again, but I stopped his hoof with my own.

"And you'll get some rest," I insisted.

"Wish I could," he said. "But the cart's half busted, and it's going to be a right pain in the flank to haul it like it is. Sickle's out, and no offense, but you and Star aren't exactly the strongest ponies around."

I smiled. "I can change that."

He opened his mouth, then shut it again, blinking. "...Just how much can you do with that shapeshifting?"

"As much as I have the magic for," I said. "Get some rest. I can

handle the wagon.”

I placed my belongings in the cart, and focused. I thought back to a particularly large stallion I had encountered, back in wartime Appleloosa, and imagined what he might have looked like in his prime. Huge, muscular, with a deep brown coat and a cute white stripe running down his muzzle. Then I called up my magic, pouring energy into the spell. The magical flames sprang into being and washed across me, consuming most of my reserve. It was a lot more magic than I would have liked to spend, but after Starlight’s gesture, I was feeling much more comfortable with my prospects.

The world stretched and warped in strange ways as I changed, and I blinked away the dazzling light to see the whole world had shrunk in perspective. I looked back to Starlight’s wide eyes, even with my own as she sat in the wagon.

She blinked. “Holy shit.”

I grinned, half-turning. The huge body felt only slightly cumbersome, but also immensely powerful and stable. “Shapeshifting has its advantages.” My voice rumbled, almost as deep as Sickie’s.

She blinked again, her head drawing back in alarm. “You’re a stallion!” she blurted, her eyes darting to my hindquarters—then jerking away, sputtering for a moment, and finally covering her face with a hoof.

Sickle broke out in uncontrolled laughter, while a blush rapidly spread across Starlight’s cheeks. She cast a flat glare at the laughing mare. “Oh, shut up.”

Sickle laughed herself into exhaustion, leaving her lying there, panting. I strapped myself into the lopsided harness while Dusty muttered to himself. “I’m surrounded by crazy mares. Wonderful.”

The uneven load and missing wheel made the going rough, but my assumed form made it fairly easy to deal with.

It was just a couple minutes later when Sickie hummed approvingly. “Nice view.”

I tucked my tail between my legs, while she chuckled. The wagon shook as she shifted her position. A few minutes later, she started to snore.

“So,” Starlight said, once she was certain Sickie was sleeping deeply,

“we’ve finally found something Sickle is scared of.”

“Combat drugs make for extreme and erratic behavior,” Dusty said. “I wouldn’t read too much into it. Though let’s be fair; you can’t kick a balefire bomb.”

“You can,” I said. “It just doesn’t tend to improve your situation.”

Dusty snickered. “Okay, you can’t kick a balefire *explosion*.”

“It still got her running so hard she passed out,” Starlight said. “Twice.”

“Dash makes you do stupid stuff like that,” Dusty said. “I wasn’t kidding about the guy who blew up his heart.” I heard him shifting around to lie back, grunting faintly, and finally sighing. “Summer Breeze. Decent buck, if a bit lazy. He was in the militia, but wanted to be a Ranger. Problem was, he didn’t have the endurance. One of the tests for Rangers is a five-mile run in full gear. He couldn’t make it in time, and he didn’t have the patience to exercise to get there.

“Instead of giving up or exercising more, he somehow got ahold of some Dash and tried again. No pony knew, of course, but we found four empty inhalers on him. He chain-dosed on his run. The Dash told him he could keep going, so he went all-out. He probably felt unstoppable.

“Problem was, Dash lies. You don’t know how much strain you’re putting on your body until something fails. He made three miles at a full gallop with fifty pounds of gear, then *bam*—” he clopped his hooves together, “—he just drops. Unlike Sickle, he was done. Stone dead. Doc said the muscles in his heart gave out, but the Dash kept him running until his brain choked.” He huffed softly, laying his head down. “It’s some scary shit.”

Starlight whistled, low and quiet.

“Yeah,” Dusty said. It was several seconds before he spoke again. “Rangers tend to carry a dose of combat drugs for emergency use. I had to use Dash once. It’s potent, and it can be amazingly useful at times, but I’ll be happy if I never have to use anything like it ever again.”

“So,” Starlight said, slow and thoughtfully, “something you don’t like the idea of using, but are willing to use if it becomes necessary?”

Dusty snorted, bitterly. “Yeah, yeah. I get your point.”

“Will you cunts shut up,” Sickie mumbled. “I’m trying to sleep.”

Starlight and Dusty both became very quiet as we continued on across the desert.

As for me, I kept casting glances back. We watched behind us the whole way out of Pale Sands, but we saw no more signs of that alicorn.

Chapter Sixteen

Homecoming

We passed the chain link fence that marked the southern edge of the Pale Sands territory exactly two days after passing its twin to the north. Other than Ponytown, the entire expanse between those two points had been barren, empty desert.

The low mountains at the edge of the badlands drew near.

For the most part, we had recovered from the “incident” near Ponytown. Starlight’s splint had been removed, and after a bit of ginger testing and a warning to go easy on it, she was walking normally once again. Healing potions are truly remarkable things. Both she and Dusty still felt a little sore from their injuries, but it was nothing significant. I just hoped Starlight was actually healed, rather than stubbornly refusing to acknowledge her injuries.

As for Sickle, she had taken up wagon duties once more, allowing me to retake my normal, less exhausting disguise. She was unhappy with it, though possibly not for the reason you would think.

“Fucking wasted potential,” she grumbled as she pulled the cart. “I mean, come on. You give yourself a fuckstick like that and you don’t even use it? Dumb cunt.”

We did our best to ignore her.

By mid-day, we were approaching the settlement on Starlight’s map, a place nestled between Pale Sands and the Badlands, cheerfully named “World’s End”.

When we laid eyes on the place, I recognized it. Not the settlement, of course, as it hadn’t been there before the megaspells. The terrain, however, I recognized. World’s End was built between a pair of rock formations that jutted up higher than the rest of the rocky hills around them. It was a distinctive landmark, one that could be used by returning changelings to orient themselves on their way home.

We were close.

The cliffs between the two formations were now adorned with several structures, some of which were even suspended over open space,

with rope bridges criss-crossing the gap. The only presence on the ground was a fortified structure, with what looked to be a large winch-lift hanging down from above. The lowest level of cliff-hanging structures had metal scrap strapped to them, and looked to give excellent firing positions over the lone access point. A few more structures were set around the tops of the rock formations, though it seemed most of the space up there had, somehow, been converted to crops. I found myself pondering how difficult irrigation must have been.

The distant tones of a bell rung out across the distance, almost as soon as we were in sight. We could see movement along the rope bridges as the inhabitants moved to take up defensive positions.

We continued on. Dusty gave a wave when we were still a few hundred yards out. "It's good to look friendly," he quietly said. Starlight and I waved, as well.

As we drew near to the fortified lift-house I could see clearly that not all of the residents were ponies. I saw the hulking forms of a few buffalo among their numbers, and to my surprise, the stripes and exotic stylings of a pair of zebras. There was even a pony whose face looked like it had been skinned and left to rot for a week. I figured she had to be one of those ghouls Dusty had told me about. Either that, or one of the most unfortunate ponies of all time. Possibly both. Even from the distance, the sight provoked simultaneous feelings of sympathy and nausea.

We were only a hundred feet away when a heavily armored mare atop the lower fortification called out. "Hold up, there. We saw you coming in. You came through the Pale."

It seemed more like an accusation than a question, but Dusty answered anyway. "We did."

She glanced to her side, to a buffalo who had what could only be described as a cannon strapped to his side. He stepped forward and spoke, his deep words echoing clearly without raising his voice. "The pale ponies reign over that land. They are the harbingers of death itself. No one passes through their domain." He gave a short pause, as if for drama. "How did you escape their influence?"

"We ran," Dusty said. "Very fast."

The buffalo continued to stare at him for several seconds. I was starting to grow worried, when his shoulders suddenly shook, and he let out a deep laugh. "You must have run very fast indeed, pony, to outrun death itself." He turned back to the mare, giving a nod.

She nodded back and turned to us. "Okay, what's your business here."

"We're traveling south," Dusty replied. "Our wagon's damaged from our trip through the Pale, so we were hoping to get some repairs. Maybe a safe bed for the night. That's it."

"There ain't anything to the south of here. What's your interest there?"

Dusty cast a quick glance my way before answering. "It's personal business I'd rather not shout out across the whole town, if that's okay with you."

She mulled that over for a moment before nodding. "Fair enough. Any trade in there?"

"We've got some supplies we might be convinced to part with, if the caps are right."

The mare considered us for a few seconds, tapping her hoof on the edge of the wall, and finally nodded once more. "Okay. Leave the wagon in the bunker, along with your weapons, and you can come up." She turned and called out. "Open the gate!"

A minute later, we were riding the lift on the short journey up. We were just lifting up through a hole in the floor of the winch room when a set of massive claws reached out to grab the edge of the lift. Starlight yelled out in surprise and slammed into the opposite rail of the lift. I turned toward the threat, and my veins ran cold as I laid eyes on my first hellhound, mere feet from my face.

He loomed over us, towering over even Sickie. His claws were nearly as long as my foreleg, and sharp fangs protruded past his lips. A coat of dark fur covered his muscular body, thick and ragged.

"Chickenshit," Sickie muttered at Starlight, as the hellhound held the lift stable and opened the gate. Then Sickie turned to the hound. "What the fuck are you doing here, Spot?"

The hellhound frowned down at her. His voice rumbled deep

enough that I could have sworn I *felt* his words as much as heard them. "Ain't my name, Peenk."

She glared back at him for several long seconds, before finally breaking into a grin. "Shit, it's been a long time. Didn't think I'd find you out in the ass end of Equestria."

My heart-rate slowly returned to normal as it became clear that the hulking, heavily clawed monstrosity wasn't about to reduce us to bloody chunks. I only then noticed that there were a few other townsponties there, including the pair that had greeted us at the walls. Starlight still looked quite pale, backed up against the far side of the lift. Dusty just looked a little more wary than usual.

"Yeah, been uh long time," the hellhound said in a stilted, awkward accent, and flashed a grin full of vicious teeth. He reached out, flicking a claw against Sickle's breastplate. "You must be doeen well. Didn't theenk I'd see you in dis." His head tilted. "You the new boss, huh?"

"Nah," Sickle said, shrugging. "I'm done with that shit."

The hellhound nodded. "Good," he said. "Change ees good."

The mare who had addressed us before cut in. "If you're done terrifying our guests," she said with a teasing tone and a smile, which earned a chuckle from the hellhound. Then she looked to Dusty. "My name's Granite. I'm the mayor of our nice little town. So who might you be?"

We introduced ourselves, and she nodded along as she listened.

"Good, good. Now then, we're not shouting across the whole town any more. What brings four well-armed ponies way down here?"

I had a moment of concerned reflection on how I had come to be a well-armed pony despite my best intentions. It was certainly an accurate description. I had been carrying two firearms, a pair of grenades, and more than two hundred rounds of ammunition, and that wasn't counting the pipe rifle with another hundred rounds I had packed away, or the significant arsenal contained within our wagon. I quickly shook off the feeling of distress and refocused on the conversation.

Fortunately, it seems Dusty had used the short delay of our ride up to plan a response that didn't involve looking for an ancient changeling hive. "We were looking for a pony, and heard he headed out into the

Badlands.”

The townsponties exchanged wary glances. Granite frowned slightly before continuing. “So you’re bounty hunters, then?”

Dusty shook his head. “No. We’re not after him for money. We’re just trying to bring a bad pony to justice.”

She mulled it over for a few moments, her frown deepening. “I see. And who is this pony you’re looking for?”

“His name is Banger. I’m afraid the name is all I have to go on. He sold out a bunch of ponies to be raped and murdered.”

“Never heard of him,” Granite said, but finally nodded. “Ain’t our business what you do out there. Just *keep* it out there. We won’t be having any of that in our town. Got it?”

“Got it,” Dusty said.

“Good.” She turned, gesturing a hoof to the stallion beside her. “Sundown can show you to the lower berths. Anypony that wants to trade will meet you there, and there are beds in the back if you’re spending the night. A hundred caps, and the place is yours for the day.” She fixed Dusty with a firm stare. “I’d suggest not staying too long. Once word gets out that you’re hunting somepony, you ain’t going to find many friendly faces.”

“We’re just passing through,” Dusty said. “We’re not here for anypony in your town, just—”

“Ain’t anypony going to care *who* you’re after,” the mare shot back. “And we ain’t going to care about *why* you’re after them. Just that you *are* after them. Now, we’re going to be gracious hosts and let you rest for the night, but I expect you to be on your kindest behavior.” She looked around at us. “And I expect you to be gone in the morning. You got that?”

Dusty hesitated, but finally nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good,” she said with a sharp nod. “And if you ever have to come around again for another pony, I suggest you steer clear of here. We don’t take kindly to that sort of thing.”

Dusty nodded again.

Sundown led us along a series of walkways and rope bridges, until we descended to a low-hanging structure a short distance away. Wide

windows gave a good view over the crevice between the two giant pillars of rock, while inside were a few tables, a half dozen chairs, and a few simple cots.

On the way, Dusty also filled me in on hellhounds, and how the diamond dogs, ever on the bottom end of Equestrian society, had somehow won the magical-radiation-mutation lottery to become the most dangerous creatures in the Wasteland.

Once we had arrived at our lodgings, Sundown informed us that we were to remain in the lower town, between the 'berth' we were in and the lift down. The rest of the town was off-limits.

As soon as he had left, Dusty started grumbling. "So. Apparently tracking down an accessory to rape and murder is a *bad* thing, now."

"Well, I thought it was a good story," I said.

He flashed a wry smile, which died as quickly as it came. "And I can't help but note that they stuck us in the lowest part of their town, with only a single, easily defended route back into the rest."

I looked back. The stairs leading up from our current residence ended on an open platform, connected to the rest of the lower town by a long rope bridge. One of the defensive positions overlooked the entire length of it, and I couldn't help but notice that it was occupied. The earth pony with a double-barrel shotgun was the most obvious, but it was the zebra that really caught my attention. She was almost entirely hidden under her cloak, but it didn't hide the long, slender rifle she had braced on the frame of the window. While the earth pony was relaxed and laid back, though with the shotgun within easy reach, the zebra appeared completely focused, as if expecting trouble.

"Well that's comforting," Starlight said. "And our guns are all down on the ground."

"You dumb fucks and your guns," Sickle grumbled as she dug around in her armored bags. She eventually retrieved another pill bottle, popping it open and slapping a pill back between the bars of her muzzle.

Dusty scowled. "Seriously? After what happened yesterday?"

"Fuck off," Sickle snarled, turning to head back the way we came.

"Hey, wait!" Dusty called out after her. "Where are you going?"

She halted, turning to look over her shoulder. "Me? I just spent

half a day staring at the ass-end of a big beefy stallion and thinking of all the fun I could have with somepony I don't have to worry about breaking in half. Except Whimper's a fucking pussy. So I'm going to go find Spot again, pin that mutt to the first flat surface I can find, and fuck his dumb little brains out."

"You're going to... with a *hellhound*?" Starlight blurted, looking at Sickie in shock.

"Fuck yeah, with a hellhound," Sickie said. "Spot's about the only one who's ever matched me in wrestling, and he's a lot better at fucking than most stallions." She grinned. "'Sides, hellhounds are a lot more interesting. Ponies, they're all just smooth and boring, but hellhound cocks are—"

"Oh, *goddesses*, I don't care!" Starlight replied, bringing both forehooves over her ears.

"Then why the fuck did you ask?" Sickie said, her grin taking on an increasingly sadistic twist. "Or are you jealous?" She hiked her scraggly tail, leaving her bare and unarmored rear fully exposed. "Come on, then! Stick your face right up in there and put that mouth of yours to use for once!"

"You're revolting," Starlight said, turning away, her eyes narrowed in an angry glare and color tinting her cheeks.

Sickie laughed. "Nah, I just know how to have some fucking fun instead of being a little bitch all the time." Her tail lowered again. "And if you cunts are going to be so damn uptight, then I'll just have to find someone that *does* know how to relax."

She climbed the stairs and left.

Dusty sighed. "I really hope she isn't about to get us all into trouble."

"When does she *not*?" Starlight asked with a grumble, tossing her saddlebags onto one of the cots. "Maybe we should just go. We're obviously not welcome here."

"Tempting," Dusty said. "But I'd still like to see if we can get our wagon fixed. The terrain ahead is a lot more rough. Even if the wagon holds up, it's going to be a pain in the ass to haul with a broken wheel."

Starlight flopped out on one of the cots, burying her face in an

old straw pillow that muffled her voice. "Yeah, well, that'd be Sickle's problem."

"Except I'm sure it'd make her even more irritable, and then she'd make it *our* problem. 'Sides, all our stuff is in the wagon."

She sighed. "Yeah, fine."

Dusty and I sat at one of the tables. Lacking anything better to do, I dug out one of the packages of ancient, pre-cooked food from my saddlebags. I was halfway through it when Sundown returned with a couple of the townspories to discuss trade.

One was the ghoul I had spotted before, giving me a good look at her. Or at least, as good as I could get without being obvious in my attention. It was, to my surprise, less concerning up close. Yes, it gave me a clear view of the decay the poor pony had suffered, to the point that I could see bare skull in a couple places, but it also let me see that her condition appeared relatively stable. I had imagined the decay as active, festering rot, but it was actually fairly clean.

If not for the difference in appearance, I probably wouldn't have even noted her. She participated in the negotiations with the same cautiously friendly attitude of her companions, showing no sign of burden over her condition.

In the end, Dusty managed to get lodging for the night and repairs to the wagons for the exorbitant price of two of our spare assault rifles and ten loaded magazines. We could afford it, though; after looting most of a mercenary company and seizing their supply wagon, it was a small portion of what we owned. We were, apparently, moderately wealthy by Wasteland standards.

We returned to our accommodations for the evening while the other ponies worked on our cart. Dusty took a chair and dragged it to the edge of the structure, and spent his time leaning against the window frame. It gave him the perfect vantage point to watch over our wagon.

I rested my forelegs on the windowsill beside him and looked down. A buffalo had shoved his shoulder under the edge of the wagon, lifting it up while a pony used a length of wood to brace it in place.

"You're worried," I said, keeping my voice low.

"You're not?"

"I'm always a little paranoid," I said. "Comes with the profession."

He gave a short huff, and the corner of his mouth twitched upwards. "I guess we've got that in common."

"I guess we do," I agreed.

He slowly nodded, his voice quieting to a whisper. "So, I know the soldier's take of the situation. What's the spy's take?"

"Concerned," I said. "There are few reasons to react that poorly to the story of bringing a pony to justice."

"Yeah," Dusty said. "That's what I was thinking. Shit. And here I thought it made a good story."

"No, it was good," I said, giving him a smile. "The creative use of true events is one of the best ways to fabricate a cover story. Consistency is one of the most important factors when constructing a long-term falsehood, and it's much easier to be consistent when you're using real-world facts."

He cast a sideways glance my way before looking back to our wagon. "Thanks, I guess. Still backfired."

"It's a rare lie that doesn't have the chance to backfire," I said. "And since I'd really rather not advertise to everyone that we're looking for a specific *place* instead of a specific *pony*, I'd have likely come up with a similar story, myself. They might draw the wrong conclusions about what's out there, and I'd really rather not have a bunch of treasure hunting ponies digging around my hive. I appreciate the discretion."

He gave another little huff, a shadow of a laugh. "Thanks." Then he shook his head. "Not that it seems to have helped our situation."

I nodded. "True. Fortunately, whatever their reasons to dislike us, the town as a group doesn't seem intent on harming us. I'm concerned that individuals in the town might not share that thinking, however. I think we'll be safe during the day, while their guards are watching us, but I'm not sure if—"

"We're not staying the night," Dusty said. "I'd been thinking the same thing. We'll head out as soon as they get that wagon fixed." He looked back to me. "Get some rest. Just be ready to do your thing if somepony starts something."

I hesitated, but nodded. I'm not sure what he expected "my thing"

to be. I suppose I'd have to improvise.

The rest of the evening was uneventful, despite the constant low-level tension. It was a familiar feeling. From Dusty's relaxed posture and perceptive eyes, it seemed one he was quite familiar with, as well.

The sun was getting low when Dusty stood up. "Looks like they finished. Let's get going. Where's Sickle?"

Sickle wasn't in the small portion of the town that we were told to stay in, to absolutely nobody's surprise. A few armed ponies, as well as the cannon-armed buffalo, met us when we made our way to the lift, and one of the ponies headed off to track her down. Several minutes later, Sickle and her hulking hellhound friend made their way down to us along the ramps and walkways.

Sickle wore a very satisfied smirk as she walked up. "Hey, bitches. The fuck's up, now?"

"We're leaving," Dusty said, and Sickle halted, scowling.

"Seriously? We just fucking got here!"

"The wagon's fixed," Dusty said. "We can get a few more hours in before it gets dark, so we're heading out."

Sickle groaned. "Wonderful. We finally get to a place we can relax and have fun, and you dumb cunts are trying to drag me off already. Could have spent the whole night fucking like mad, but no..."

The hellhound gave a quick wince, ears folding back, and he cast a quick glance at the couple of townsp ponies nearby. None of them seemed to notice. Their attention was focused on Sickle.

"Isn't like you have to come with us," Starlight grumbled.

Sickle gave an angry snort, but then grinned. "Nah, I ain't going to miss out on this shit." Then she lifted a hoof to point at Dusty. "But you're hauling the cart. I'm done for the day."

"Fine," Dusty said.

The hellhound reached out, placing his huge claws across Sickle's shoulders. "You shud stay, Peenk. This is uh good place."

She looked back to him, pausing only a moment before letting out a snort. "If it's a good place, you *really* don't want me here. 'Sides, I'd get bored. Not enough fighting." She chuckled a little, flashing a grin up at the hellhound. "Might have to swing by and visit every now and

then. It's been way too fucking long."

The hellhound chuckled in reply, though his sideways glance toward the other ponies made it seem slightly awkward to me.

We loaded into the lift, and the hellhound unlatched it, letting us descend. Granite watched us from the nearest guard post. So did several other ponies, and I caught at least a couple disapproving glares.

We retrieved our gear, and Dusty strapped himself into the restored harness. While we strapped on pouches and guns, Sickie climbed up into the wagon, flopping back heavily with a satisfied grunt.

Soon the cart was rolling along, down the slight slope leading away from the town.

The sound of glass bottles clinking together rose from the wagon as Sickie rooted around in her bags, finally pulling out a couple bottles of antique beer. "Shit, it's been a long time since I saw Spot," she said, dropping all but one of the bottles beside her. "Met him when I was still with my old gang. He hit the same caravan we were setting up to jump." She popped open the bottle and took a long swig. Then she snickered. "He popped out of the ground right under their brahmin. Fuck, you should have seen it. It was like the damn thing just exploded! Meat and guts everywhere!"

She laughed, while beside me, Starlight scowled and muttered. "Must have been love at first sight."

"Hah! Fuck no. That was our caravan, not his. 'Course, most of those pussies didn't want anything to do with a hellhound, but I went down there and butted heads with him." She tapped the lip of the bottle against the cheek of her helm, then traced down along her neck to her shoulder. "Can still kinda see the scar where he caught me, damn near took my head off. Heh, I remember him grinning all smug like until I planted a hoof right in his gut. Should have seen his dumb expression when he looked up and realized he just got pinned by a pony!"

"You have such a charming way of making friends."

Sickie shrugged and took another swig of her drink before continuing. "Eh, I almost wanted to kill him for clawing my face up, but I was so high I couldn't even feel it. 'Sides, it was fun. We kinda just wrestled and beat on each other until we were both exhausted. Then we kicked

back and shared some beers.” She grinned over her bottle. “And then we fucked.”

“Of course you did,” Starlight muttered. “Because the first thing you think when you see some monstrous creature tearing an animal to pieces is, ‘Hey, I wonder if I can have sex with it?’”

Sickle snickered. “Pretty sure you’d think it, too, if you ever gave it a chance.” She waved her bottle our way. “Should get your marefriend to turn into a hellhound and give you a good hard fucking. You’ll see.”

Starlight’s ears laid back as she grimaced, color rising in her cheeks. “I’ll pass, thanks.”

“Come on,” Sickle teased. “I thought you liked the cock? And two-leggers just let it all hang out in the open. You can’t tell me you didn’t get a good eyeful of that sheath.” She took another draw from her bottle before tossing it out behind us. “I ain’t kidding, though, you should try it. I’ve fucked lots of things: buffalo, zebras, donkeys, even a pair of griffons this one time. And *lots* of ponies. Hellhounds got them all beat, easy.”

Starlight shot her a glare. “Seriously, how do you not have, like, every disease ever?”

Sickle stared at her for a few seconds before shrugging. “Health potions?”

“They don’t...” Starlight stopped herself, shook her head, and simply continued walking.

Sickle just chuckled quietly and laid back, relaxing. There were several seconds of silence before she muttered. “Fuck. Now I’m horny again.”

We ignored her, of course. We even continued to ignore her when she unstrapped one of her spiked hoof-boots. The side-walls of the wagon helped, concealing most of the contents of the wagon from us, but they did little to block sound. Sickle was, as with all things she did, extremely unsubtle.

Dusty continued on with equal measures of disgust and determination, with his ears laid back against the sound and his scowling gaze fixed straight ahead. Starlight and I drifted a little further from the cart. I did my best to not dwell on the situation.

None of us said anything about it, naturally.

We were almost a mile away from the town when I noticed Dusty's head dip down to reach into the folds of his cloth barding, drawing out the pistol he had concealed there, and returning it to its holster.



If there's one thing the Badlands have going for them, it's the desolation.

I can't imagine how much worse my reaction to the Equestrian Wasteland would have been if I hadn't grown up in the Badlands. Admittedly, I had spent most of my time there in the hive, rather than on the barren and largely lifeless surface, and after that, I had lived in Equestria for several years. Still, it made the transition less jarring than if I had lived in the northern parts of Equestria, with their rolling, grassy fields and sprawling forests, all teeming with life.

That desolation was ideal for changelings seeking to remain hidden. With the surface devoid of food and water, and the ground split into a maze of canyons and hills, it was rare for anyone of any sense to wander out that way.

It also meant that the land was almost entirely unchanging. I had no need of Starlight's PipBuck and its map to guide us. When we set out that morning, I knew exactly where we were. By mid-day, the pale slice of sky ahead of us had stretched over half the sky, as we passed under the ragged edge of the Enclave's cloud cover. Looking ahead, it was as if I had stepped back in time. The bare sun beat down on bleached rocks, the air growing hotter and drier by the moment, just as I remembered it. The rugged canyons and valleys we followed led up between sheer cliffs, leaving plateaus and spires of rock decorating the land.

I know not many outside my hive would share the opinion, but I always found the Badlands to be beautiful.

We walked on, pebbles and dry earth crunching under our hooves and the wagon's wheels. I even sprouted wings, taking to the air to get the same perspective I would have had on my return trips to the hive.

Everything was exactly as I remembered it. Even in the few places where the centuries had worn down a slope or rocky formation, they

were still immediately recognizable.

The heat was certainly unchanged. Starlight and Dusty's almost awed attention to the sun was quickly stifled. Without the protective layer of the clouds, it beat down on us, unrelenting. Sickie had it the hardest. Between muscling the heavy wagon over the broken and hilly terrain, the ever increasing altitude, and the heavy armor she wore, it wasn't long before she was panting in exhaustion.

I'm not sure how long she would have stubbornly pressed on if Dusty hadn't called for a break. We sheltered beside one of the many rocky columns that stretched up from the ground, which had always looked to me as if someone had stacked rocks atop each other. It gave us a little shade.

Sickie unharnessed herself and tore her helmet off. It banged down against the rocks as she flopped down, moving only enough to retrieve the pair of bottles that she chugged, one after the other.

"How far is it to your hive?" Dusty asked.

"Probably about thirty miles," I said. "Sorry, I think my estimate of our travel time was a little low. I always flew. I hadn't expected how much slower it would be to walk, especially with a wagon in tow."

Even Sickie's abrasiveness was worn down by her exhaustion, though she still huffed out a retort between pants. "You're welcome to haul it yourself if you think I'm too fucking slow."

Ignoring her, Dusty asked me, "Is the terrain like this the whole way?"
"Worse."

"Then I'm thinking we leave the wagon here. It'll be a lot easier to carry a few days of food and water than it will to drag that thing with us."

"Sounds good to me," Sickie mumbled as she pulled out another bottle.

"And drink some water," Dusty said, looking to her. "Alcohol isn't going to help."

"Alcohol always helps," Sickie grumbled as she popped open the bottle. "Stop being such a cunt."

Dusty frowned at her, silent for several seconds before replying. "You know, I might find that more insulting if you didn't throw it around every other word."

“Like I give two shits what you think,” Sickle said before tipping back the bottle and chugging it all in one go. When it ran dry, she threw it back the way we came. The sunlight twinkled off the final drops streaming from the bottle as it spun through the air, remarkably vivid and strangely beautiful after the dullness below the constant cloud-cover.

An hour later, we had each packed five days’ worth of food and water in our saddlebags. As we prepared to set out, I laid out the course for the rest of the day. “There’s an outpost along the way to the hive,” I said. “A way station and hideout for returning Infiltrators, among other things. It’ll be a good place to stop for the night.”

The moon and stars were shining overhead by the time we reached the familiar rocky formation, and the narrow gap in the rocks below it. I paused before the opening to tug at my magic, unwinding my disguise. This was a changeling place; it felt appropriate to return in my natural form.

I stepped into the passage, pushing just enough magic into my horn to cast a faint light. The rocky ground was covered in dry earth and grit, entirely undisturbed. We crept forward in the dimly lit space, following the tunnel almost fifty feet before it ended in a metal door. It was unlocked. I pushed it open, and stepped into the small bunker beyond.

It wasn’t an impressive space, but it was immediately familiar. Many times I had stopped in this place. It was a single room, with a small alcove at one end. The main part of the room held boxes that had once held supplies for passing changelings, a large table that doubled as both a dining surface and a map table, and a tiny kitchen. The alcove at its end held two sets of bunks set into the smooth rock walls, stacked three high, and at the back was a toilet and shower.

Without a thought, I reached out with my magic. The switch beside the door clicked loudly in the silent space, and to my surprise and relief, the lights flickered and struggled to life. I let out a shuddering sigh. A soft rattle sounded from the tiny vent at the back of the room, the stale air stirring as it mixed with the fresh air being drawn in.

While the outpost was coated with dust, it was intact. I simply stood

there, marveling at it. That small part of my hive had survived. This one place that I had been so familiar with was still there, unchanged. With a little bit of sweeping, it would have been indistinguishable from my last visit, two hundred years ago.

Dusty eventually stepped up beside me. "Should we look around?"

I pulled myself away from my nostalgic thoughts and nodded. "Of course."

As he checked over the stack of boxes, Starlight followed me to the table at the center of the room. There was a substantial amount of papers spread across it, with a box of neatly arranged writing implements set to the side. Some were maps, others were printed reports. My attention was immediately drawn to the small stack of papers near the center of the table. I gently slid them over with my magic, brushing away the dust.

The top paper was a printout of a simple grid of letters. I gave a soft huff of amusement, which caught Starlight's attention.

"What's that?"

"A vigenèigh cipher table," I said, sliding the paper over to her. "One of the low-security methods used for—"

The page below was covered in writing that formed the familiar jumble of nonsense of a ciphertext. "...encoded messages." I drew the paper over, scanning over the words.

"Like a code?" Starlight asked, peering at the new paper as well. "What's it say?"

I gave a soft chuckle and smiled. "I may be good with cryptography, but not that good. I'll have to take some time to decode it."

"Oh," Starlight said, her ears drawing back as if she had just said something very stupid. That lasted only about a second before perking forward again. "So how long will that take?"

"When it comes to cryptography, I'm afraid the key is patience. Complex ciphers can take a lot of work to decrypt." I picked up the cipher table before her, setting it down with the encoded message. "But if it was left here, it was probably meant for any changeling from our hive to read. We'll see."

The next paper had only eight words written on it.

Siphon. Bulwark. Scatter. Umbra. Shale. Flitter. Cinder. Desire. My throat had already tightened as I started to read, but as I reached the last one, it felt like a weight had dropped in my gut.

Starlight stepped in close beside me, her voice soft and concerned. “What is it?”

“They’re names.” I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “My sisters.”

Starlight’s ears drooped in sympathy.

Somewhere behind us, Sickle rumbled quietly.

“Desire was an Infiltrator, too,” I finally said. “We trained together. We were close.”

A thin, neat line crossed through her name, as well as Scatter’s and Umbra’s.

Starlight reached over my shoulder, giving me a comforting squeeze. I leaned into it for a moment before drawing in a deep breath and refocusing.

I returned to the stack of papers, but there was nothing more to find. All that remained were supply requests and the final reports destined for analysts in the hive, left undelivered for two centuries. I even recognized one of my own reports on strategic supplies shipped through Appleloosa in the week before the end, as well as records of what smuggling activity I had been able to track. I felt an unreasonable urge to take that report, to scour it for anything I might have missed, as if I might have somehow prevented what had happened.

I set it aside with the rest of the reports, to be ignored.

Dusty had finished searching through the supply boxes. Every single one had been emptied long ago and neatly stacked back in place.

As we sat and ate a late dinner, I started working to decrypt the message left so many years ago.

My suspicions turned out to be correct. The message used a simple cipher, one that would never be used for high-security traffic, but which served the purpose of quickly protecting a message from casual observation. Even without the key, I could have likely broken it in a few hours at most. But it really was intended for any changeling in our hive to read, and as such, it used a common and well-known key. It took

only a couple minutes to transcribe the entire message to plaintext.

I sat back, reading the message as I held it, floating, before me. Then I read it again.

I was starting on a third read-through when Starlight finally spoke up. "What's it say?"

I had to force myself to speak. "The changelings who came here all received substantial amounts of magical radiation," I said. "The ones who survived headed north into Equestria." I folded the paper, which crackled dryly. "They were looking for C.L.T. facilities."

"What, any of them?" Starlight asked.

I tucked the folded paper into my saddlebags. "It seems that way. Maybe not all, but... it does appear to have been a widespread project."

A hint of concern touched Starlight's expression, as if sensing something was wrong. "That's... good, right?"

I huffed out a short breath, and nodded. I even managed a weak smile. "Yes. It means there may still be some of my sisters out there, waiting."

I settled in with my own as-yet untouched food.

Starlight finished eating well before I did. She sat awkwardly for almost a minute before speaking up again. "You keep using the word 'sister' a lot. How many sisters did you have?"

I shrugged weakly and spoke around a soggy bite of limp, canned hay. "Almost the whole hive." When her eyes widened in surprise, I added, "The queen laid all our eggs. It's just how changelings are. Even the few that weren't laid by her were treated as sisters."

Dusty had a questioning look, but remained silent. I suspect Starlight's next question was the same on his mind. "No brothers?"

"No," I said. "We don't really have any use for males."

Dusty's expression had turned skeptical, but he only managed a cautious "Um..." before I continued.

"That isn't an expression of bigotry," I said. "It's biology. Ponies have only small differences between the sexes, but male changelings are very limited compared to females. Different biological castes. The only reason male changelings are even a thing is to ensure the queen can be

fertilized.” I shrugged. “But seeing as female changelings can shapeshift to change sex, there isn’t any reason for a healthy hive to produce males.”

That just seemed to make Dusty even more uneasy. “So... what do you do with male, um... hatchlings?”

“Nymphs,” I corrected. “And we just don’t have any. Fertilized eggs are always female.”

Sickle cut in with a chuckle. “Oh, sure, and you all get bitchy whenever I start talking about sex.”

“I’m not talking about sex,” I said, casting a flat glare her way. “I’m talking about reproduction. Of all the ponies in the room, I would think *you* would be particularly clear on the distinction between the two.”

“Oh, ouch,” Sickle said, chuckling some more. “Whimper grew a bit of spine under that shell.” Then she stopped and blinked. “Wait, do bugs even have spines?”

I looked away from her, returning to the previous conversation. “Anyway, yes, pretty much any changeling in the hive could be considered my sister, even if it isn’t quite biologically true. It’s not quite like a pony family, but...” I trailed off, remaining silent for several seconds. They all waited patiently, until I spoke again. “But I guess it kind of is. At least, it was in my hive. We’d do anything for our sisters, even if we’d never met before.”

There were a few silent nods, and after a short moment of contemplation, I returned to my food.

We were about ready to settle in for the night when Starlight looked to the back of the alcove. “Do you think those showers work?”

I shrugged. “The outpost still has power, so maybe.” A thought struck me, and I frowned. “But the catchment hasn’t been cleaned or maintained in two hundred years. I doubt it’s safe to drink.”

“As long as it’s not radioactive, that should be just fine,” Starlight said as she walked over. “I don’t need a drink. I just want to feel clean for a change.”

She stood to the side, reaching out with her magic to turn the faucet handle. A deep, rattling groan sounded from somewhere below, and she quickly turned the handle back. “Well, that’s—”

“That’s normal,” I said, smiling at the knowledge that the outpost

was largely functional. “This place wouldn’t get used for weeks at a time, and the water always drained from the pipes. You have to let it run for a bit.”

She nodded and turned the handle again. Again, the rattling groan started up, growing louder. Starlight jumped back when the first explosive sputter of water burst from the shower head, followed a second later by another, and rapidly grew into a steady spray marred by only the occasional hiccuping sputter. The water was murky and brown with the first few sprays, but was already lightening by the time the flow had stabilized.

As it ran clear, Starlight grinned, murmuring a quiet thanks to Luna and stripping off her belongings. She dove into the water, and let out a sharp gasp. “Damn that’s cold!” Despite that, she closed her eyes and plunged her head under the flowing water, grinning happily.

She opened her eyes to see an unusual luxury floating before her in my magic: one of the bottles of soap I had salvaged from Paradise Beach. She laughed and snatched it, and soon was lathering up. She arched her back and turned this way and that, practically dancing under the steady stream of water, her hooves splashing in the water that swirled around the floor drain.

The rest of us sat back, unable to help smiling at the simple pleasure and enthusiasm of something that had once been so mundane.

Starlight was halfway between panting and shivering when she finished, but grinned as wide as I had ever seen as she walked away from the shower, dripping wet and clean. As she fetched a towel to dry off, I took my own turn at the shower.

The water was icy cold, but it still felt amazingly good as it flowed over my carapace. I fetched an old, faded washcloth set beside the shower and scrubbed all over, removing the weeks of grime and oil and gunk that had remained even after multiple transformations. It felt liberating.

And I have to admit to a moment of narcissism as I admired the glossy luster of my shell, shining as the water flowed over me.

I was interrupted by a grind of metal on concrete, and looked back in alarm. Sickie was partly wedged into one of the lower bunks, her

armor scraping and screeching against the top edge of the nook as she tried to force herself into a space that was far too small for her. "Oh, this is brahminshit!" she finally growled as she gave up, and then spent a couple seconds wrenching on the cot mounted within before it tore away with a crack of sheared-off bolts. She threw the frame to the ground and flopped down atop it.

I was tempted to object, but I let it go.

When I finally finished with my showering, I was met by Dusty, who smiled and inclined his head to the bottle of soap. "Mind if I use a little of that?"

I smiled back, floating it over. "Not at all."

As he started to shower, I quickly towed off. I shook out my wings, casting off the final drops of water, and lifted into the air. I floated up to hook my forelegs over the edge of the top bunk, hovering beside it; Starlight was already lying there, grooming her coat with an old brush.

I met her smile with my own, and spoke. "Hey, do you mind if I take this one?"

Her smile turned to curiosity. "Sure. Why?"

I suddenly felt very silly, my ears folding back. "Oh, uh... it's just that every time I came here, I always slept in this bunk..."

She stared back blankly for a couple seconds, as my concern grew. Then a smirk crept across her face. Her shoulders shook in barely constrained laughter as she lifted a hoof to point at me. "Holy crap, that's not fair. No! Creepy bug monsters shouldn't look that cute and pitiable!"

I blinked in surprised and, I'll admit, confusion. After a few moments of laughter, she finally controlled herself enough to speak again. "Yeah, you can have it," she said between laughs.

She scooted to the side and slid out, a hoof holding onto the edge to neatly swing herself into the bunk below. I blinked again, and finally gave a chuckle of my own as I processed what had just happened. I floated up and dropped myself onto the cot, rolling over to my side.

Starlight's hoof was still holding onto the edge of the alcove. Her laughter had stopped. A couple seconds later another hoof joined the first, and her head peeked up over the edge. "Hey, Whisper..."

"It's okay," I said, giving her a smile. "Even if I'm most certainly not 'cute'."

She chuckled, flashing a smile. The expression quickly faded away again. "That's good, but... I mean, are you okay? With..." she glanced around, her eyes lingering on the table and its stack of papers before returning to me. "...all this?"

My smile withered away. After a moment, I nodded. "I'll be fine."

She hesitated, as if deciding what to make of my reply. Finally, she hauled herself up to sit beside me. Her eyes were full of worry. "You want to talk about it?" she asked, her voice gentle and full of caring.

I remained silent for several seconds, but slowly relaxed. "If you want," I said, a faint smile returning. "I'm sure this whole expedition of ours is going to be an emotional rollercoaster for me, but... we're doing something good. I think I'll be just fine."

She stared back into my eyes for several seconds before her concern slowly melted away, and she leaned comfortably into my side, mirroring my own soft smile. We sat there, quiet and relaxed.

Eventually, she spoke again. "I never had much of a family. Never knew my dad, no brothers or sisters. It was just my mom and me." She heaved out a sigh before continuing. "What were they like? The ones you were close to, like Desire."

My throat threatened to tighten again. "Desire was... energetic. Active. Enthusiastic." I found myself smiling again, just a little. "And very social and friendly. She liked people."

Starlight gave a soft chuckle. "Sounds a little like me."

"A little," I said, nodding. "But she was a lot more... flirtatious." I gave a chuckle of my own. "Which she cultivated into a fine skill set as an Infiltrator. She enjoyed her work, and I'm sure she left a long line of mares and stallions longing after her alter-egos."

I told her about more of my sisters, but mostly about the rest of our small group, Infiltrators who had bonded during our time in training. There was Shadow, gentle and kind, and so quiet that you might mistake her for being shy, but always so clever, especially when it came to avoiding attention. There was Dagger, always bold and playful, yet probably the most aggressively calculating of us. And then there was

Ripple, amazingly brilliant in many fields, but particularly in understanding how others thought; a natural manipulator.

The stories didn't last long; we were both quite tired and relaxed by then. I was still smiling as I drifted off to sleep, with the warmth of Starlight's body, and her friendly affection, right beside me on the slightly-too-small cot.



We set out shortly after sunrise the next morning. I felt remarkably refreshed. I was clean, well-rested, and comfortably fed. Despite all that, I was troubled. The happy memories recalled the previous night made way for worry and doubt.

"I don't know what we'll find at the hive," I said as we buckled on saddlebags and slung our weapons. "I don't even know if... if there will *be* a hive left. The message mentioned magical radiation, and I know at least one balefire bomb was detonated in the Badlands. I saw the flash."

That news had a chilling effect on Starlight and Dusty; if Sickie felt anything at the news, her reaction was hidden under her helm.

"Why?" Dusty asked. "Balefire was zebras, right? Why would they bomb a wasteland?"

"To kill the changelings who were helping Equestria, perhaps," I said, darkly. "Or perhaps one queen wanted to remove a rival, and was able to acquire a megaspell through some scheme."

"Well there's a terrifying thought," Starlight said. "Stealing a megaspell."

I shrugged. "Why not? My hive did."

She gawked at me.

"Or so the rumors went," I said. "It's quite likely we had something to do with Equestria getting information on zebra megaspells. We might have even been the reason they had balefire bombs to test. I don't know for sure. Not my field."

We traveled throughout the morning and early afternoon, winding our way through narrow canyons as we drew closer. With every step, the tension in my gut grew, as if chewing at my insides. Our progress was agonizingly slow in the rough terrain as our path twisted this way and that, and we were forced to climb over obstacles or navigate steep

slopes. Several times, my wings buzzed anxiously, ready to draw me up into the sky, to cover the last miles in an aerial sprint, but my hooves felt as heavy as lead. The whole time we traveled, I remained silent, save for the most basic of directions.

A terrible sense of dread dug at the back of my mind as we ascended toward one more ridge. Part of me wanted to turn back and never return, but I couldn't stop.

We climbed higher, and the shattered spires of rock that had stood on the barren slopes above my hive came into view. Many had fallen, and unfamiliar cracks ran through some of the cliffs, but the land above the hive, though battered, remained. Off to one side, the familiarity of the terrain abruptly ended. Just a mile from my hive, the rocky ridges had been torn away, ancient canyons opening abruptly into a deep crater that had been carved into the rugged terrain. Even in the daylight, wisps of green were faintly visible, flickering and rippling in the depths of the crater even after all these years.

The balefire bomb had detonated frighteningly close to my hive, but it had missed its mark. A mile away, and nestled deep below the rocky surface, my hive waited.

We pressed on with a renewed pace. The path to the main entrance was so broken, twisting, and narrow that it was easily overlooked, and wound through difficult terrain, intended to make any ground assault near impossible. A sheer wall of rock lined one side, while the opposite was a straight drop to the canyon floor, hundreds of feet below. Fallen rocks and crumbling cliff faces made the path even more difficult, forcing my companions to climb over or squeeze around several obstacles. Many sections were passed with me hovering anxiously beside the narrow path, offering a little more support for the rougher sections.

Starlight jerked when her PipBuck clicked, quickly snatching it up. A couple more clicks followed a few seconds later.

"What's that?" Dusty asked, ears perking up alertly.

"Radiation," she said, and let the PipBuck hang on its strap again. It let out another lonely click.

Dusty frowned, his expression tense. "How bad?"

"We're fine," she said, giving a playful smirk. "Unless you plan on

camping out here for the next few months.

Finally, we reached a large split in the cliff face, looking like any of the hundreds of other gaps and crevices filling the landscape. The crack was wide with a relatively flat bottom as it led back into the cliff face. Unlike the other crevices, which ended after just tens of feet, this one snaked its way back, eventually turning into a tunnel that pierced deep into the stone. The brilliant sunlight quickly faded behind us, leaving us once again navigating by the light of Starlight's PipBuck. The air was chilly, a sharp contrast from the Badlands outside.

The tunnel turned sharply to the side, then doubled back, before abruptly opening into a smooth-walled chamber. The ground simply ended, falling away in a pit that extended far beyond the weak light of the PipBuck, and about thirty feet across. Narrow metal-grate stairs were bolted to the walls, descending into the darkness in a steep spiral. The small lights that ran along them, normally casting off barely enough light to navigate by, lay dark.

We made our way down, the sound of hooves on metal echoing in the stillness. The powerful clanging of Sickie's spiked shoes drowned out the groaning of metal caused by her passage, and the occasional click of Starlight's PipBuck.

"How deep is this?" Starlight asked, a couple of minutes later.

"Four hundred feet," I replied. "We should be most of the way there."

Finally, we reached the bottom of the shaft. A single, wide tunnel led out, and as we stepped into it, Starlight's light illuminated the giant steel-cog door.

"Huh," Dusty said, a much more subdued reaction than Starlight's.

"Holy shit," she said. "That looks like a Stable door."

"It should," I said, smiling for the first time that day. "It was stolen from Stable-Tec themselves, with the theft disguised as war profiteering from a corrupt official. I wish I could claim credit for it. I did manage to re-route an entire shipment of concrete and rebar, and pin it on a smuggler who had just died in a fire with the authorities."

I stepped up to the blast door, reaching out to touch the metal surface. It was covered in a thick layer of dust. "We already lived underground. It wouldn't take much to turn the hive into a fully functional

Stable.” My hoof slid down, leaving a streak in the dust before settling on the ground again. “We were less than a year from completing the project.”

I turned away, moving to the access panel beside the door. I lifted the protective cover. Thankfully, the “ready” light lit up. Beside it, another blinked red, indicating that the door was operating on backup power only. I started pressing keys, typing in a long sequence of numbers. My hoof moved to the large red button at the side, hovered over it for a long moment, and with a deep, steadying breath, I pressed it.

An electric buzz hummed out from the wall, stretching on for several seconds. My stomach did a flip at the loud, mechanical *thump* that emanated from the door, and then, with a shriek of metal scraping against concrete that filled the cavern with a wall of sound, the great door ground its way open.

I glanced over to my companions. Sickle had bared her teeth, and pawed at the ground, the sound lost behind the scrape of the door. Starlight glanced my way, giving a cautious but reassuring smile.

Beyond the door, everything was dark. As it rolled open, the Pip-Buck’s light spilled across the entryway of the hive, with several overturned trolleys and crates lying scattered about. I caught quick glimpses of the security station, the door machinery, all the regular sights of the entryway. My attention, however, was immediately drawn to the hall beyond where, just at the edge of the light, movement drew my eye, and I froze. Stepping out from around the corner was the one thing I hadn’t dared to hope for: a changeling.

She stopped, head turned to stare at us, one pale eye reflecting the green light. To my sinking horror, I realized the other eye was nothing but a vacant pit. The changeling’s jaw hung askew, the entire plate of her cheek shattered and caved in. Her wings lifted, revealing the tattered ribbons that remained. Her carapace was dull and pitted.

The blast door thumped loudly as it came to rest, followed immediately by the walking husk’s clicking, rattling cry—and the dozens, *hundreds* of cries that answered it.

There was a shout. A hoof shoved against my chest. I stumbled and staggered back. My hind legs gave out, and I fell to my haunches.

Then the sound of gunfire tore through the air, echoing through the halls of my dead hive.

Chapter Seventeen

Goodbye

I've never been one for assigning intellect or personality to things that don't have those qualities. Such things are simple lies to make the unknown seem less misunderstood. Similarly, "fate" is a simple way of pretending that all things happen for a reason; that there is no such thing as misfortune or chance, merely actors living out a play.

I've always found that level of self-deception to be incredibly unhealthy in the long-run, but I knew enough of psychology to understand its reasoning. People like order. They like things to happen for a reason, preferably an intelligently driven reason. While in reality an event might be an extremely long chain of independent events all contributing to a single outcome, to the point where it can be incredibly hard or impossible to declare one single action to have been the one responsible for the ultimate outcome, it can be much more comfortable to decide some complex event happens because of a single entity or force of nature deciding it will happen.

This becomes even more tempting when there are plainly existent entities who are actually capable of doing such things. The princesses Luna and Celestia were vastly powerful beings. Now they are revered as goddesses, and their influence is perceived—almost certainly incorrectly—in a great number of events. Ponies offer up pleas and prayers to these princesses-turned-goddesses, and expect events to be altered in their favor. There are even a number of spirits out there who exert various degrees of influence over the world. It is quite true that events *could* be influenced by these entities.

The problem comes when individuals start seeing *all* events as being under their influence. It's a self-centered conceit, where individuals perceive themselves as somehow more important than the individual beside them, and therefore, what happens to them must also be more important. Realistically speaking, almost everything that happens is a natural result of the course of events, with no outside intelligence steering the results.

There is no such thing as fate.

But for a brief moment, I entertained the idea that some malevolent entity had set its intentions upon me.

It was just too much for me. I'd seen so many horrible things in such a brief span of time. My queen, a decayed and empty husk. The remains of my sisters, some still floating in the murk of their own decay. The vileness of raiders, mutilating, raping, and killing ponies that should have been their kin. Another pony, one who should be a benevolent leader, instead selling out the ponies he was responsible for to those same raiders, all for a few pieces of metal.

The whole way to my hive, I had tried to prepare myself for the worst. I had expected to either find a glowing crater where my hive had been, or a cold tomb for those who had died centuries ago.

I'd even learned of ghouls. I'd *seen* a pony ghoul just two days before. And yet, I had refused to consider the possibility that such a thing could happen to my own kind. I must have pushed it away, as a possibility too painful to consider. I allowed emotion to blind me to a threat, and left myself vulnerable as a result.

Then I had encountered them, face-to-face and impossible to deny. It was too much, so in my desperation and horror, I imagined that some foul intellect had decided I hadn't suffered enough already. I imagined that it had animated the dead of my hive, all so I would have to face down the corpses of my own sisters as they tried to kill me.

All that was missing was a spoken accusation. "Why you?"

But it was all a lie.

There was no malevolent force determined to make me miserable. The world didn't have it out for me. It wasn't even unfair. It simply *was*. Complaining about my misfortune, or trying to seek out some imagined enemy, was pointless. I had to deal with the situation I found myself in, rather than imagine some completely different problem.

I'll admit, all of this is considerably more clear-minded than I was at the time. I was on the verge of breaking down. Maybe I did. I'm not entirely clear on what happened. I remember being pushed back, and gunfire. The next clear memory was being held in Starlight's forelegs, my face buried in the soft fuzz of her neck, her coat damp with my tears.

I pulled back, wiping at my eyes. Starlight stayed there, a hoof resting on my shoulder as I struggled to recover. I caught sight of Dusty and Sickie at the open blast door, though my gaze immediately dropped back to my own hooves. I couldn't meet their eyes.

Starlight remained silent and supporting. In the background, I heard Dusty and Sickie exchange a few words. Sickie was spitting and griping about something, but I didn't catch what. The first words I clearly remember were Dusty's. "We should leave."

"No," I croaked, quickly wiping at my eyes again. "N-no. We came this far. We can't... I can't just leave now."

Starlight wore an expression of concern, but she helped me stand. I wobbled, but managed to keep my hooves. If I had been a bit more clear-minded, I might have worried over how weak I felt, even with the supportive emotions flowing from Starlight.

The entrance to my hive was a scene of carnage. The choke-point formed by the blast door was perfectly tailored for Sickie's abilities. She stood there, heaving deep breaths, over the shattered remains of a terrible number of long-dead changelings. They were piled three or four deep around the entrance, crushed and mangled by her hooves and blades, and blending into a single gray, jagged mass in the monotone light. The broken shells leaked murky fluids, which filled the air with a powerful stench of rot and decay. The smell dug up horrible memories of my first day in the Wasteland; a slight tremble passed through my legs before I could stop myself.

Sickie was practically drenched in the fluids, dripping from her muzzle and chest. She grimaced and spit again, though strangely, she went still and quiet when she saw me looking at her.

I approached the scene with trepidation, stepping past the scattered shell casings from Dusty's rifle. He stepped in front of me, looking as concerned as Starlight did. "Whisper... there's probably going to be more."

I nodded, almost stumbling as I did so. I had to stop and steady myself, taking a deep breath; it met with mixed results, given the nauseating scent in the air. "...I know."

"And if we go in there," he continued, "we could get surrounded. If

we're attacked from multiple directions, we'll need every gun."

"I'll be fine," I said, though I'm sure it wasn't a terribly convincing statement. "...It was a shock. Unexpected. Surprises are... more psychologically impacting. Now I... have time to mentally process and prepare." I swallowed. "I'll be fine."

He frowned at me for several seconds before speaking again, and my ears drooped. "You're not fine," he said. "I get that this is important to you, so I'm willing to go in there, but you're not in good shape. If I decide we're leaving, then we leave, no arguing. We can always come back later. Got it?"

I nodded again. "Of course."

"We're also on limited supplies," he said. "I spent a lot of ammo keeping the ferals—" I winced—"from piling onto Sickie and weighing her down with their numbers. I know it's going to be hard, but we need you contributing to the fight."

Sickie grunted quietly, but said nothing.

"I will," I said. He continued to stare at me for a moment before nodding, though I could tell it was with a great deal of reluctance.

We entered the hive. I flew up and over the short wall of bodies, holding my breath as I went. I refused to watch as the others made their way across; their grunts and the crunching of broken exoskeletons was more than enough for me. I shuddered at the sound.

The bodies trailed off rapidly past the entrance, the few who had been gunned down before piling into the melee. There was plenty of room to walk around them in the wide hallway.

I tried to ignore the bodies and instead focus on the hive itself. Apart from a few new bullet holes, it seemed this part of it was in good condition. The concrete walls were cracked in a few places, leaving a bit of dust and debris scattered on the floor, but the damage was minor. The maintenance panels spaced regularly along the floor were still in place, and the lights built into the ceiling, while dark, were intact. Even the paint, a cool gray, was almost entirely intact, with only a little chipping and peeling.

Seeing the place lit only by the green light of the PipBuck screen gave it an eerie appearance. The subtle difference made the familiar

space seem alien and sinister. It was *wrong*.

I shook off the feeling of unease, refocused on the task at hoof, and led us into the hive.

The hallway split, leading to different places. I took the hall that led deeper into the hive, which immediately led into a wide atrium, extending two stories both above and below our entrance. The open center stretched well outside of the PipBuck's light, dark and cavernous. Balconies overlooked the open space, and above, massive arches of reinforced concrete crossed over the vaulted ceiling, the nearest two just barely within the light's glow.

Beside me, Starlight let out a low whistle. "Wow. Except for being pitch black, this is a lot nicer than what I had pictured."

I walked over to the edge of the balcony, hoofsteps echoing weakly across the empty space. "What were you expecting?"

In the corner of my vision, I could see her ears droop low. "I just... well, you know, the whole 'bug' thing, and you're calling it a hive, so, I dunno, was thinking like bees or ants or..." She trailed off, scuffing a hoof against the floor. "Shit. Sorry."

I looked down from the balcony. Below, the courtyard was cloaked in shadows. Green light glinted softly off the water below the still fountains. Once, it had been a common area, dotted with changelings relaxing and socializing. Now, the only signs of this were a few misshapen lumps lying scattered among the benches, tables, and open spaces, barely visible in the gloom.

I sighed. Then I blinked as Starlight's words finally connected. "Huh? Oh, no. Some hives were like that."

"Oh?" It's surprising how desperately hopeful a single word could sound. ■

"Yes," I said, looking back to her. "The Chrysalis hive was ancient, and many of the new hives kept that aesthetic. Tradition." I gestured my muzzle out to the open space. "We were quite happy to distance ourselves from tradition. I suppose it was a mostly symbolic gesture, but... I guess sometimes that can be useful in itself."

Dusty and Starlight walked up to the edge of the balcony, to look out over the courtyard. The PipBuck's light spilled over the ground as she reached the edge, removing any uncertainty as to what the scattered

shapes were.

On my other side, Sickie spat a couple more times, stopping when I looked her way.

It caught Dusty's attention, too. "Is something wrong over there?"

Sickle snorted. "I had my mouth open when I squashed one of those fuckers. Now I can't get the taste off my tongue." She spat again, grimacing. "I hate fighting fucking ferals."

Starlight muttered. "Gee, how horrible this must be for you."

"Oh, get fucked, you little bitch," Sickie said, baring her teeth before looking away from us.

I turned away from the edge to follow the balcony around the atrium, and after a moment, the others followed. It was an awkward silence that followed.

To my surprise, it was Sickie who spoke up first. "You know, you changelings are tougher than I thought. Couple of those ferals took blows that would have crushed a pony's skull, and they just shook it off."

Dusty and Starlight both groaned. "Sickle..."

"What?" she shot back. "I was giving a compliment!"

"You're shit at giving compliments," Dusty said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, well, I don't do it very fucking often, now do I? Ass."

The heavy mechanical door we needed to use was shut, forcing us to spend a minute as I opened the emergency access panel beside it, engaged the manual override, and cranked the door open.

As it started to open, another rattling cry echoed from the hallway beyond. I ignored it, focusing the entirety of my attention on the crank. I remained focused, even as a scramble of hooves struck the door, flailing through the small gap that had opened. Moments later the door was open enough for the dead changeling to squirm its way through the gap, only to be met by the carapace-shattering stomp of Sickie's hooves. Something cold, wet, and sticky splashed against my hind leg.

I kept cranking, until the door stood open enough for us to easily pass through, and we continued on. I avoided looking down as I stepped over the shape on the floor.

The hallway led directly to the central hub, a series of high-vaulted chambers where the various residential areas met. On each floor, the

connecting hallways opened into broad walkways that circled and crossed over the central open space, while huge support columns and arches reinforced the structure.

Most changelings in the hive would pass through the space each day, so it was designed to be as pleasant as possible. The entire space in the center was a multi-level park, combining a natural-stone underground aesthetic with a variety of surface plants. Water flowed from artificial springs, trickling and pouring down rock faces and along small streams to form crystal-clear pools. A soft, cool light filled the space, like an eternal twilight, perfectly balanced for a changeling's natural eyes. Above, the roof of the chamber sloped steadily upward to a peak high above. And then there were the other changelings; always other changelings, coming and going, flying and walking, attending to business or relaxing on their time off.

Now that pleasant space lay dark, silent, and dead.

As the most heavily traveled place in the hive, it would have been foolish of me to expect it to be unoccupied. A changeling ghoul stood only thirty feet from us as we entered, and with an angry cry, threw itself at us.

Sickle caught its charge in her forehooves and smashed it to the ground with a sickening crunch. As more cries echoes through the grand chamber, we drew back to the connecting hallway; it reduced the angles we could be attacked from, but only just. It was a major path of traffic, and that meant it was built wide. Sickie stood in the middle, and we quickly arrayed on her flanks. Shadows danced as Starlight moved, casting the area into a confusing contrast of light and dark.

The first ghoul came hurtling at us through the air, flying on tattered wings that shouldn't have supported it. An eye-searing flash of red tore out, and half of the ghoul vaporized in a cloud of embers, while the other half crashed to the ground. I quickly looked away as it tumbled to a stop, fairly certain I had seen parts thrown about from the motion. Several seconds later, two more ghouls came running down the walkway, rasping and hissing. Another flash of red sent one to the ground.

"That's fucking bright!" Sickie snarled as she stopped the other

ghoul with a double-hoof buck that sent the limp form flying into a supporting column.

I stood to the side, floating my rifle before me as I tried to control my trembling. The trickle of dead grew quickly, scrambling and stumbling over each other. By then, a dozen or more were coming down the walkway. The faces of my sisters twisted into grotesque snarls of rage as they bore down on me, fangs bared and eyes full of hatred. They lunged, and I squeezed the trigger.

My assault rifle chattered angrily, rattling in the grip of my magic as it spewed out bullets at a terrifying rate. The air filled with the head-pounding sound of gunfire in the tight space, the scene lit by the strobe of the muzzle flash.

I don't know how much effect I had on the horde bearing down on us. I know the one I was looking at fell. Then the magazine ran empty. I got only a moment of horrified realization before one of the ghouls, one of my fallen sisters, plowed into me.

I staggered and almost fell from the jarring impact, my rifle clattering to the ground. A hoof slammed into my side, and suddenly I had a face-full of angry changeling, her dead eyes staring into mine as her mouth opened, broken fangs lunging at my face. Something tugged at the inside of me.

I might have screamed. I don't know. I know for sure that I pushed a surge of magic into my horn and blasted it into her face. I was free. Flashes of blue tore through the air, and another ghoul I hadn't seen fell beside me.

I stepped back, my rifle floating up in front of me. There were still ghouls everywhere. Sickie was roaring out, and nearby I saw Starlight firing away. I didn't know where Dusty was, somewhere on the other side of Sickie. I wasn't entirely sure what was happening. All I knew for sure was that none of the ghouls were attacking me at that precise moment. I focused, running step-by-step through the procedure Dusty had drilled me on just days earlier.

Magazine release. Remove magazine. Retrieve magazine. Insert firmly. Pull. Release. Aim. Squeeze.

My rifle roared again, and I swept the muzzle across the line of

bodies trying to get at us. One lunged at me; I swung the rifle around, still firing, and put the last of the magazine into it. Another of my sisters fell at my hooves, dead for good.

I reloaded and fired again. There was no grace or control to my fire; I simply pointed in the direction of the crowd and held down the trigger until the magazine ran empty.

And then, I finished reloading and aimed to find there was nothing left to aim at.

It was only with the sudden stillness that I realized how fast my heart was pounding, or how hard I was panting. Starlight was panting as well, turning to give me a very concerned look, which turned to relief when I gave her a weary nod in reply. My head felt slightly funny when I moved it, as if a fog had descended on my thoughts.

A deep crunch made me wince as Sickle stomped down on a still-squirming ghoul. Then she looked back to me with a broad grin and a chuckle. Even past the buzzing in my ears, I could hear her rumbling voice clearly. "Hell yeah, Whisper. That's how you do it. Fuck 'em up."

I winced and looked away.

Sickle let out a laugh. "Shit, maybe we should have brought that minigun. Just turn you loose on all of 'em."

I could barely hear Starlight's reply between my own impaired hearing and her hushed tone. "Sickle, come on, lay off. This is her family."

"No it ain't," Sickle shot back with a snort. "Her family died a long time ago." She jammed a leg-blade into a corpse, cracking right through the shell. "These fuckers just look like them, that's all. Ain't like things are all what they look like when you bugs get involved, is it?"

The last part was said directly to me. I glanced her way, saw her smug smile behind that gore-drenched muzzle, and looked away again.

Starlight stepped up to my side, and I'm sure she cast Sickle a dirty look before speaking to me. "Whisper?"

I sighed, then shook my head. My voice came out a little shaky and off-tune in my ears. "Yeah. Changelings are well aware that... what something looks like and what something is are two very different things." I cast a glance back to the scattered corpses. A shudder passed

through me, but it faded away.

The closest corpse was contorted where she had fallen, her eyes relaxed and expressionless, her limbs twisted at awkward angles. Of all the signs of injury scattered across her ancient body, the only one that drew my attention was the jagged opening behind her shoulder, where a bullet had exited, tearing out a large hole from her carapace. I lifted a hoof, and tenderly placed it atop her head, brushing gently beside her horn. "...But we also know that a physical change doesn't change who someone is, inside."

Starlight's hoof rested gently on my shoulder, comforting. Everyone was quiet, save for a rattle of metal as Sickie shrugged.

When I finally moved, it was sudden enough to make Starlight jerk in surprise. I simply crouched down, hooked a foreleg under my dead sister, and hefted her up. "Help me gather them," I said as I dragged her toward the center of the loose cluster of bodies.

While Sickie went to work without a question, Starlight hesitated a moment before her horn lit up to carry another body over. She cast a concerned look my way, which I pretended not to notice. Instead, I spoke as if unprompted. "The magical radiation killed my sisters, and transformed their bodies into something monstrous. I won't leave them like this."

It took only a couple minutes to gather the bodies. We remained undisturbed; no more ghouls appeared.

When it was complete, everyone stood back from the mound. Starlight was just starting to say something, likely asking what was next, when my horn lit up. I pushed a good amount of magic out, and fire burst out around the bottom of the heap so abruptly that she jumped back. Green fire quickly crawled up over the bodies, turning them into a raging pyre.

Dusty and Starlight edged back, especially as the scent of burning meat and shell filled the air. Sickie remained sitting right next to me, staring silently into the flames.

"I'll have to do this for the others," I said, my voice quiet against the crackle of the flames.

"How many were there, in this hive?" Dusty asked, and I shook

my head.

“Not all of them,” I said. “I’ll come back, when the future of my hive is certain, and make sure that all of my fallen sisters receive their final transformation. For now... I’ll at least give that freedom to those I come across.”

There were nods all around, even from Sickie.

The flames worked swiftly, light dancing across the chamber. Soon, the flames faded, guttered, and died away, leaving only a thick scattering of ash in their wake. The light of Starlight’s PipBuck seemed even weaker in the flame’s wake.

I stood. “We should move on.”

They followed me as we continued on, following the walkway the length of the central hub. Three times we paused by the still husk of a dead changeling who had died without being reanimated by the balefire’s magic. Each time, I bowed my head, lowering my horn close to them as I conjured more flames.

As we were walking away from the third, Starlight moved in close beside me. “How’s your magic doing? Do you have enough to keep that up?”

“I’ll manage,” I said, and gave her a weak smile that quickly faded away again. “Don’t worry. I have an important mission for the hive. I won’t endanger that.”

She nodded, though judging by her frown, she wasn’t entirely comforted by the answer.

The multiple levels of walkways closed in, arcing down to merge into a single path that entered a wide tunnel. Every now and then, another small group of ghouls came running at us, two or three at a time. Sickie and Starlight dispatched them with ease, letting Dusty and myself conserve our ammunition. The largest group came near the end of the tunnel, as the echoes of Starlight’s Lancer brought the attention of the ghouls gathered beyond. Again, the small trickle turned into a sudden flood of dead changelings. As the body of the group close in, I once again fired off a magazine in one long burst, reloaded, and fired again. The powerful crack of Dusty’s rifle and the brilliant red and blue flashes of Starlight’s weapons filled the air, as we formed

a killing line. It was as if it had become routine already as the horde melted before us, especially once Sickie met the charge. I'm not sure how many I accounted for. Only a few were still standing after my second magazine, and Sickie easily dispatched them.

I finished reloading, and as I placed the empty magazine back into my pouch, I took inventory. The results were less than ideal. "I'm almost out of ammunition."

"No shit, with how you've been shooting," Dusty said, frowning across the carnage at me. "How many mags you got left?"

I glanced down to my pouch, then back to him. My ears were already hanging low. "One."

He stared at me for an uncomfortable couple of seconds before speaking again. "I do hope you mean one *spare* magazine, in addition to the one in your weapon."

"Oh! Yes."

He nodded slowly. "Okay. You know how your rifle's selector switch has a semi-automatic position?"

I nodded.

"Use it."

Rather than replying, I twisted the small switch, letting the soft click answer for me.

Sickie snorted, already gathering the bodies up. "Shit, and here I was liking the whole changeling-berserker thing. Whisper's more fun on full-auto."

"Well Whisper is almost out of ammo. If she wants to do the whole full-auto thing, she needs to start carrying a lot more ammo." He cast a glance my way. "Or better yet, learn to spend the ammo you do have better."

"I'm not a good shot," I meekly replied, occupying myself with the task of gathering the dead together.

"Volume of fire is a poor substitute for accuracy of aim," Dusty said. "It's certainly got its uses, but you need to learn control first. I can teach you how to shoot when we're done here. Maybe even teach you a bit about being a proper soldier."

"I..." *I don't need that*, is what I intended to say. I was an Infiltrator.

My tools were guile, deception, and stealth. I wasn't a combatant.

But the last few weeks had put the lie to that idea. How many firefights had I gotten in? The same tools that had served me before were still my greatest strength, but things had changed. Appropriately, I had to change with them.

"...I think I'll have to take you up on that."

He nodded, satisfied.

With another pyre quickly burning down behind us, we stepped out into the next chamber. It towered as high as the previous chamber, but it wasn't the wide-open space that one had been. A massive structure stood before us. In the dim light, we could only just make out the closest parts of it, including a couple of the great supporting arches that crossed above us between it and the outer wall. To either side of us, a plaza stretched out into the darkness, just a couple of feet lower than the walkway and dotted with more benches and pools. The broad walkway itself continued straight on, to a set of great doors, standing wide open.

"Wow," Starlight murmured. Then, a little more clearly, she added, "Your hive keeps getting more and more impressive."

"This is the Spire," I said. "This is where the queen lives and rules, and below it are where the changelings who help run the hive work. Down there is where we'll find the servers."

The Spire loomed above us as we approached and entered through the main doors. Just inside, I started to turn to a side door, one which led into the back ways through the structure, but I halted myself. Instead, I turned back to the second set of main doors.

I was about to open the doors when my ears were assaulted with the near-simultaneous sound of Starlight's yelp, a rattling hiss, and the near-deafening crack of the Lancer firing in an enclosed space, nearly blinding me with the red flash. I jerked to the side just as a black form crashed to the ground, and several more flashes of blue lit the chamber like a strobe light, ending when the dead changeling lit up blue, burning away under the Repeaters assault.

Starlight was already staggering back, her Repeater sweeping drunkenly through the air above her as she babbled loudly. "Holy shit! What

the shitting fuck *shit*? I-it was crawling down the wall. The fucking wall!" She panted hard as she spun, sweeping her Repeater around again.

"Oh," I said, trying to calm my own breathing. "Yeah."

"What do you mean, 'yeah'?" she snapped, stumbling around as she spun around again, searching the ceiling above us; the space was high enough that the rapidly bouncing light of her PipBuck left many dancing shadows above us as the blue embers died off. "It was just crawling down the wall at us! That was the creepiest thing I've ever seen!"

"Calm down," Dusty said, while Sickie snorted something more derisive.

"It's okay," I said. "Changelings can do that."

"What?" She glanced my way several times, torn between searching the darkness above and looking at me. "What do you mean changelings can do that? You don't. Why don't you?"

My cloak shifted back as I spread my wings, giving them a single flick. "Because I can fly?"

Her gaze stopped on me, blinking. "...Oh." She looked back up, then slowly lowered her Repeater. Finally, she let out a shaky sigh before turning to me. "You think you could have shared that little bit of information *before* now? You know, before I nearly pissed myself because some creepy wall-crawling bug-zombie is trying to nibble on my ears?"

She immediately stopped, placing a hoof over the bridge of her nose as she groaned, her ears laid back. "Sorry," she said; I assume I had made some obvious reaction to her description of my deceased hive-mate. "Sorry, just... that scared the shit out of me."

"Pussy," Sickie muttered.

Starlight responded by lashing out with a forehoof, connecting solidly with Sickie's shoulder in a loud clomp of hoof on metal. The armored mare barely budged with the blow, and followed it up with a quiet huff of amusement.

"It's okay," I said, swallowing uncomfortably. "And I didn't mention it because, honestly, it just didn't seem important."

"Not... not important?" She let the question linger a moment before adding. "You didn't think it might be important, like, tactically or

whatever, that these things can *walk on walls*?”

“...They can fly.”

After a couple sputtered attempts to come up with a reply, Starlight finally sighed and sagged, a hoof returning to her face. “Fuck. My head hurts now.”

Dusty stepped in. “It still could have been useful information, but there’s no point in dwelling on it now. Let’s move on. And Whisper, if you can think of anything else unusual about you guys, let us know, okay?”

“I can’t think of anything,” I said. “But yeah, we should move on.”

I pushed on the door, and it opened a couple of inches before thumping against something and stopping. I pushed a bit more, but it refused to budge. I placed both forehooves against it and shoved, feeling it shift another inch before stopping again.

Defeated, I stepped away and looked back to Sickie. She was staring down at me, with her head inclined slightly to the side as if to say, “Really?”

I gave an awkward smile. “Do you think you could get it open?”

She responded with a short huff, then stepped past me. A crash of metal-on-metal filled the chamber as she slammed her shoulder against the door, jarring it a couple feet further open, then pushed. Her spiked shoes scraped against the floor in a way that sent a shiver through my shell, but the sounds of clattering and grinding from the far side of the door soon rose over it as she forced the doors open.

One final shove threw the door most of the way open. Most of the room beyond was in shadow, with Sickie blocking most of the light, but I could already see dozens of bodies lying just past the doors, as well as the broken remains of a couple of benches. A good number of both had been set against the doors to keep them shut.

Sickie stepped in, and I quickly followed. The room was mostly dark until Starlight passed the doors as well, her light spilling out across the room. I saw the dozens of desiccated corpses lying around us, some still clad in armor, but my attention was immediately drawn by a flash of green. I jerked, then froze, my eyes wide.

The flash of light had been the PipBuck’s light reflecting off a facet

of a giant crystal at the center of the room, standing taller than even Sickie. One face of it was badly cracked, with a few shards scattered around the floor. The floor itself was cracked and crushed in where it had fallen, forming a small and shallow crater.

A rasping, clicking cry made me jerk back; one of the bodies near that crystal was a “living” ghoul, but my sudden sense of panic faded immediately. Her body ended with the crushed remains of what had been her hips. One foreleg lay twisted and shattered, the hoof missing entirely, while the other scraped at the floor, dragging her towards us a few inches at a time. Her face, lined with cracks, was twisted into an expression of rage, but I could only feel pity for her, crippled and trapped in this place for centuries.

Sickie crushed her head under hoof, the good leg spasming and scraping against the floor a few more times before going still.

I shuddered, turning my attention back to the giant crystal. While Sickie started gathering up the bodies, I simply stared.

I jerked when Starlight brushed up against me, then let out another deep sigh as I slowly relaxed again. She spoke quietly, though still clearly audible in the quiet room. “What is it?”

“A love crystal,” I said, voice almost choking. “We called it the Heart. As in, the Heart of the Hive. It hung here in the throne room, and... and it was always kept full of love, glowing with the energy inside it. It... it’s never been dark.”

She nodded silently. It was a few seconds before she asked, “Throne room?”

I lifted my snout, gesturing behind the crystal. She leaned to the side, shifting her PipBuck to light up the simple throne at the back of the room. The giant tapestries that hung behind it on either side remained surprisingly intact after all this time.

I turned away, moving to help gather the bodies of my fallen hive-mates.

They were dry, empty husks, rather than the crude semblance of living that the ghouls had been. As I bent over the first one, clad in the armor of a soldier, I saw the injury that had killed them; a single neat hole, almost hidden below the front edge of the helm, and right

between the eyes. A pistol lay on the ground before her.

I slowly reached up, tenderly running a hoof along the side of her helm. Sickie grunted as she tossed a pair of husks onto the growing pile, and I could see both of them bore similar injuries. So did the others whose faces I could see. I turned back to the body I stood over. "They killed themselves."

Dusty paused in dragging a body over. "The radiation would have been deadly, if it was strong enough to be turning them into ghouls."

"Radiation poisoning is a nasty way to go," Starlight said. "This way... well, at least it would be quick and painless."

I slowly nodded. I could appreciate the reasoning, at least. I drew my hoof back, ready to drag the dead soldier to join the others, but I hesitated. Slowly, my hoof returned to the side of her head. I sat, another hoof joining the first, and as gently as I could, I lifted her head and slid off the helm.

Sitting back, I held the helmet before me, staring at its midnight-blue surface.

Starlight was watching me, curiously. "Whisper?"

I huffed out a slow breath, turned the helm around, and slid it on. My horn and ears slid neatly through the gaps designed for them, and the helm came to rest flush against my carapace, as if it had been made just for me.

I removed the rest of her armor, then shed my cloak and bags to don them myself. I slipped each piece on, slipping my wings through the gaps intended for them, and carefully tightened the straps until the segmented assembly fit snug and secure. Once it was all in place, it covered my body from chest to flank, leaving only the underside of my belly unprotected. A set of hoof-boots completed the set, covering the sides of my hooves while leaving the bottom exposed for grip.

With the last piece in place, I stood. The armor was surprisingly lightweight, and even more surprisingly, it didn't restrict my movements. I wasn't sure how much protection it might offer, given the light weight, but it had to be better than nothing.

Starlight was nodding when I had finished turning around to test the flexibility. "It looks good on you."

"Thanks," I said, though my feelings were a bit more mixed. I have to admit, the contrast of the dark blue on black was aesthetically pleasing. It was the significance of what it symbolized that concerned me. An Infiltrator shouldn't need armor.

A hollow thump interrupted my thoughts, followed a moment later by Sickie's voice. "That's the last of 'em."

I looked down to the dead soldier at my hooves. Sighing, I hooked a hoof under her chest, dragging it to join the dozens of others nearby. I leaned her back against the heap, as if she were sitting. Then I stepped back, calling up my magic. Green flames erupted from the pile, rapidly consuming the dry husks.

I stared into the flames for several seconds before a loud crash of metal suddenly grabbed my full attention. The cold shock of adrenaline surged through my body as I bared my teeth and spun around, shouting in a loud snarl. "Get off of that!"

Sickie was sprawled out across the throne in her typically lewd fashion, her head held at an odd angle as she looked back at me in what I assume was surprise.

I took a step forward, wings flicking in agitation as I growled at her. "Get off! That is not yours! It was Ephema's, and I'm not going to allow *anyone* but the next queen to sit there! *Get off!*"

As I huffed and growled, heart pounding, Sickie stared back at me. She gave an amused huff, the corners of her mouth starting to rise, but her expression froze, and slowly, they lowered again. After a couple of seconds, she nodded. "Kay."

With that, she casually slid off and walked away.

A deep shudder passed through me as I fell back to my haunches, heaving deep breaths to calm myself. My legs trembled. To my side, I caught Starlight's wide-eyed expression, as she silently mouthed, "Wow."

I lowered my head to my hooves, eyes closed as I calmed down, letting the adrenaline burn away.

The pyre was almost burnt out by the time I stood again. Starlight was sitting nearby, looking awkward. Dusty was picking through the abandoned weapons, a couple of magical energy rifles poking out from

under the flap of his saddlebags. Across the room, Sickie stood in the shadows, leaning against a wall.

I took my time recovering my equipment, strapping on bags, slinging my rifle, and donning my cloak once more. By the time I had finished, the last of the jitteriness had passed.

“Okay,” I said, drawing everypony’s attention. “Time to move on.”

I started to move to the back of the room and the doors there, but hesitated at the giant crystal. I stared at the Heart, dark and empty. Only a moment of consideration passed before I lowered my head, touching the tip of my horn to the crystal, and called up my magic. It was only a tiny amount, but it was enough to bring out a gentle glow from the depths of the crystal.

I caught Starlight’s questioning look when I stepped back. “I couldn’t just leave it dark like that.”

She gave a little nod.

I led us to one of the doors in the back of the throne room. Like the main doors, most of them were barricaded with the remains of chairs and benches. Dusty’s attention was immediately drawn to the center door, which did not.

“Why did they barricade these, but not that one?”

“That leads to the queen’s chambers,” I said, as I helped Starlight carry away one of the benches. “There’s no other entrance.”

“So they were keeping it safe?”

“I assume so.”

He nodded. “Did you want to check it out?”

I froze, almost dropping my end of the bench. *Yes*. “No.”

We finished removing the crude barricade and passed through, entering an access hall that led into the depths of the hive’s administration center.

As we walked down the hall, Sickie stepped up beside me. I resisted the urge to shrink away, especially when her head turned to stare at me. “So. Armor, huh?”

“Yes,” I said in a perfectly neutral tone.

She nodded. Then her hoof lifted and struck my side, giving a powerful shove. I slammed into the wall, my head cracking against the

stone. The impact knocked my breath out, and I staggered for a couple steps before regaining my balance.

Starlight shouted, but Sickie ignored her. She continued to stare at me, her expression impossible to read behind that helmet of hers. "It any good?"

I glared up at her. "Yes," I said, with a clear edge to my voice. Despite getting the wind knocked out of me, my unexpected encounter with the wall hadn't actually hurt.

Sickie bared her teeth in a grin. "Good," she said, and turned to look ahead of her again. I continued to glare for several seconds as we continued on.

You'd think being able to feel certain emotions might make it easier to understand ponies, but the fact that she had held some small level of positive feeling for me throughout the encounter just made things more confusing.

Fortunately, there were no more unexpected armor-checks along the way. We made it to the main stairway and headed down. We encountered only a single ghoul along the way, apparently trapped in the stairway.

Five levels down, I led us out. The halls there were much less impressive than the large public spaces from before, but they were still of comfortable size and cleanly cut into the rock. It had also apparently been abandoned. There were no bodies, reanimated or not.

Finally, we reached the doorway I was looking for. I stopped before it, huffing out a short sigh, and whispered quietly to myself. "Please, let things be simple, just this once."

Dusty shot me a questioning look, but I just shook my head, pushed open the door, and stepped through.

As Starlight's light flowed over the room, my ears and wings drooped at my side.

Past the technician stations, a broad window looked in on the server room, and the mangled lumps of metal and gemstones within.

Dusty muttered a curse under his breath, while Starlight trotted up to the window, lifting her PipBuck as she peered around the server room. "It's all trashed. What happened? Ferals don't normally care

about property damage.”

“Security protocols,” I said, sitting down heavily to lean back against one of the technician’s desks. “The servers’ databanks get wiped, matrix disruption grenades are used to wipe any remaining information and collapse the spell matrices, and thermite charges destroy the hardware. Information security, in case the hive is lost. I’d hoped they hadn’t decided to do this.”

Dusty cursed again. “So we get nothing.”

“Not here,” I said, leaning my head back to thump against the desk. I repeated that a few times before grunting and forcing myself back to my hooves. “But not all information is digital, or stored on the servers. We should go to the command center.”

“Where’s that?” he asked.

“Four levels up,” I replied. “But first...”

I turned to the technician’s stations and started searching around. The results were swift and bountiful. Within a couple minutes, I had acquired an extensive toolkit for computer and electronic work, a smaller, more portable kit, various cables, six datastores, including one labeled “software toolkit”, and a pair of portable terminals that put my much larger one to shame. In the process of gathering them up, I also noticed that the “emergency destructive devices” locker still had contents, and we gathered them up, as well; four matrix disruption grenades and a pair of thermite charges. I had no idea if they’d ever be useful, but I took them all the same.

Once those were all tucked away, we headed up.

The command center occupied the entire level it was on. The two stairwells connected to the ends of a single hallway, and in the middle of that hallway was the entrance to the command center, flanked by fortified security positions. As expected, the door was locked.

This posed a problem, as there was no way Sickle was bucking that door down. It was a heavy blast door, a foot thick. On top of that, the locks were electronically powered, and required a constant supply of power to remain unlocked.

As soon as she heard that, Starlight went to work. After knocking around on the frame of the door, she brought out her cutter. We

all retreated around the corner, waiting in the darkness as the sharp, powerful light flashed and danced.

Her first, exploratory cut opened just enough of the doorframe to peer inside the machinery and wiring there, and gave her a better idea where to cut. The second cut, lasting for a couple minutes, opened a foot-tall hole. Then it was a matter of digging at the internals and trying to get them to work.

It was a good half hour of work before she hooked up a spark battery to a couple of cables, and with a muffled buzz, the machinery spun to life.

“Come on, come on,” she muttered to herself, eying up inside the hole she had made. I could just make out the edge of some cylinder drawing away from the door. Then, with a loud thump, the cylinder stopped, and the door lurched. “Yes! Open it!”

Sickle stepped forward and shoved. Some mechanism squealed and ground in protest as the foot-thick door slowly swung open. Starlight removed the spark battery, the machinery producing a final thump as the buzz ceased, and repacked her tools.

The door thumped heavily against its stops, and with a sudden shriek, an armored ghoul dropped onto Sickle’s back.

Both Starlight and Dusty’s weapons snapped up, but neither fired as Sickle spun around. The ghoul flailed and bit uselessly at her armored back, until one spin sent it off-balance and it lost its grip. Sickle lashed out with both hind legs, smashing the ghoul against the open door with a sickening crunch.

More ghouls came, and Sickle charged forward to meet them. We followed behind her, stepping through the doorway and into the entry gallery. Blue lines cut through the air, taking down one of the three ghouls rushing towards us, while Sickle met their charge with her own, smashing both of them against the low wall of the gallery. Their struggles ended moments later.

We scanned around, weapons sweeping over the room. The entry gallery overlooked the central operations room, a large space with dozens of desks with terminals, all facing the trio of large projector screens. To the sides, hallways on both the main room’s level and our

own led out to specialized offices, with chipped and faded lines of color leading the way to different sections. While I could see several bodies, there were no more ghouls.

Sickle took a step, wobbled, and toppled over on her side.

There was an assortment of startled replies as we rushed over to her side, but she was already getting back on her hooves.

Dusty was the closest to her head, though he gave the sharp horn a wide berth. "You okay, there?"

"I'm fine," she muttered. "I just tripped."

"Uh-huh," Dusty replied, frowning.

"Fuck off," she replied, a little louder. "I got ghoul gunk everywhere. It's slippery. Ass."

Dusty frowned, but didn't press the matter.

With that more or less settled for the moment, I turned to the emergency supply cabinet beside the door. To my surprise, it was open and empty, except for some filter cases and spare batteries.

I turned back to the first changeling ghoul, clad in the same kind of armor I had just acquired. Sure enough, she wore a respirator mask, one of the supplies missing from the cabinet. She also wore a bandolier of pouches, carrying replacement spark packs for a magical energy weapon that was nowhere to be seen. Hanging from that bandolier was the item I had originally hoped to find in the cabinet: a flashlight.

I unclipped it, then turned and held it out to Dusty. "There's a blue line on the wall in the hallway to our right. You and Sickie follow it. It'll lead you to the computer security department, and the backup server. I expect they'll have destroyed it as well, but it's worth a check."

Dusty accepted the flashlight with a nod.

"Starlight and I will be down in the pit," I said, inclining my head toward the main chamber.

We parted ways, and I headed down the ramp to the main floor of the room. I headed straight to the rear-most desk, elevated to look over the stations in front of it. I figured, if there was important information to be found, Ops Lead was the place to start.

All the desks were covered with various folders and papers, as well as a thick layer of dust. Another body lay behind the desk. A respirator

mask was strapped to her face, connected by a short hose to a bottle hung around her neck. Even past the centuries of decay, I could recognize Vigilance. This was—had been—her domain.

I tore my view away from her, throat tightening a bit. We hadn't been close, or even spoken much, but this was a face I recognized. Instead, I turned to her desk. I pressed the power button on her terminal, just in case, and when it produced no result, looked to the papers lying on the desk.

"You need that on?" Starlight asked, already prying at the back panel of the terminal with a hoof.

"It would help," I said. "Can you do that?"

She chuckled, floating out her compact electronics kit. "Oh yeah. I've done this a lot. It's surprising how much stuff is tucked away behind terminal-operated locks. Powering stuff up is a useful skill for scavengers." The back panel came off with a soft pop, and she got to work. "And you guys even use the same Stable-Tec terminals everyone else uses."

She retrieved a spark battery from her bags, and after half a minute of tweaking and rewiring, leaned over the computer and stabbed a hoof at the power button. The terminal hummed and chirped as it sprang to life, the screen flickering awake with a soft green glow.

A few seconds later, it finished booting up, and the screen displayed a login prompt.

It was my turn to get to work. I retrieved one of the new, smaller portable terminals and turned it on. It sprang to life without complaint. To my satisfaction, I found that it had all the software tools I would need, and quite a few my older terminal had lacked. A few moments of digging produced the right debug cable from my bags. I plugged it into the exposed port inside the open back panel and rebooted Vigilance's terminal.

This time, text representations of all the spell processes scrolled down the screen of the portable terminal. It was trivially easy to halt the spell matrix at the right point and convince it that, yes, I had entered a correct login.

There was very limited information stored locally. I started skim-

ming through entries, which were mostly scheduling, along with a few back-and-forth messages about a game night. Starlight sat next to me, reading the messages that popped up.

Then I found a message log. It only held fifteen messages, but from the header, I could see they were all priority messages sent from the Ops Lead to Queen Ephema and her assistants during the final day of the hive's life.

We read the entries together.

0832 – INFOP reports asset Manehattan 3138 has gone off-task for a priority investigation of Four Stars central offices. Multiple work teams dispatched without announced work orders. Site on elevated security, with activation of lethal measures. Zebra contacts in Four Stars may be higher placed than initially believed. Asset Manehattan 1284 reports elevated MoM traffic and arrival of Steel Ranger detachment; believes MoM is preparing a major raid. INFOP prioritizing infiltration of Four Stars to investigate possible mid- to high-level threat.

0955 – NIGHTFALL – INFOP reports asset Canterlot 6916 has discovered a Four Stars work skywagon parked near the castle. Presence in Canterlot is unexplained. Vehicle abandoned, no occupants or cargo. Possible Zebra ties concerning. Asset Canterlot 6916 tasked with immediate investigation–BROKEN MASK. INFOP declaring all further Four Stars traffic as NIGHTFALL.

“What does any of that mean?” Starlight asked. “The, um... ‘INFOP’ and the like.”

“INFOP is Infiltration Operations,” I said. “Basically, my boss’s boss. They’re in charge of all espionage operations. ‘Broken Mask’ means that task is top priority, and is to be pursued as aggressively as

possible, even if that means the Infiltrator has to burn an alias or expose themselves. And ‘Nightfall’... that’s bad. It’s one of the reporting keywords to indicate the severity of the message contents.”

I glanced at the next entry, and hesitated before adding, “In fact, there’s only one keyword that’s more severe.”

1101 – ECLIPSE – SIGINT reports abrupt increase in communications traffic in Zebra strategic defense network; decryption pending. Possibility of lead-up to large-scale offensive actions.

ECLIPSE–ECLIPSE–ECLIPSE

1113 – ECLIPSE – SIGINT reports traffic indicating full activation of Zebra strategic assets. OPLEAD suggests enacting COCOON protocol.

1116 – ECLIPSE – INFOP reports inability to contact Zebra assets. No contacts made in past four hours. All assets presumed lost or ineffective. Assume large-scale strategic/megaspell attack imminent. Requests permission to declare BREAKOUT for all assets globally.

“And what does—”

“‘Breakout’ was the command I got on the day the megaspells hit,” I said, suppressing a shiver. “Drop everything and run away as fast as you can. It usually means the MoM is about to bust down your door, not...”

Starlight slowly nodded. “And ‘cocoon?’”

“That one’s new to me.”

1118 – ECLIPSE – Staging begun for COCOON protocol. Recommend Queen departs immediately for COCOON site 4. BREAKOUT command issued to all Infiltrators. Further instructions added when possible to comply with COCOON.

1122 – ECLIPSE – OPLEAD acknowledges, wishes best speed to Queen. Command is remaining in-place to continue operations. Will continue to update on situation.

1135 – ECLIPSE – All section leads reporting large-scale conventional missile attack on Canterlot. City-wide shield is holding against attack. Local Army mobilized to evacuate nearby civilian population.

1200 – ECLIPSE – Unconfirmed report of megaspell detonation, vicinity Cloudsdale.

1202 – ECLIPSE – SIGINT intercepted Equestrian PINNACLE - SPELLFLASH traffic confirming megaspell detonation in Cloudsdale.

1213 – ECLIPSE – Further megaspell detonations confirmed in Manehattan, Fillydelphia, and Maripony. More unconfirmed reports coming in. SIGINT reports zebra strategic communications are significantly degraded, but indicate retaliatory megaspell strikes.

1215 – ECLIPSE – Unknown megaspell event reported inside Canterlot shield. Shield holding.

1221 – ECLIPSE – Current count, eighty three megaspell detonations confirmed, more underway. SIGINT reports complete breakdown of both Equestrian and Zebra strategic communications.

1225 – ECLIPSE – Hive under attack. Megaspell detonation in close proximity. Hive intact. Damage assessment underway.

1238 – ECLIPSE – Balefire ingested by ventilation systems. Radiation levels rising to rapidly lethal levels throughout the hive. Oxygen levels critical. Declaring the hive lost. Enacting information security protocols and

lockdown. Evacuation underway. Command remaining in-place to coordinate while secondary air supplies hold out. To anyling receiving this message: the hive lives on in you. Good luck.

I didn't realize I was trembling until Starlight's foreleg closed around my shoulders. I gave a weak, shuddering sigh, leaned my head gently against hers, and closed my eyes.

Hoofsteps drew closer, echoing strangely in the irregular room before halting a short distance away. "You found something," Dusty said. It wasn't a question.

I took a deep breath, slowly sitting more upright as I opened my eyes, looking to him. He stood a short distance away, the flashlight in his mouth pointed at the ground. Behind him, Sickie was already moving to gather the bodies.

"Messages," I said, and weakly motioned a hoof at the terminal. "Sent while the hive was dying."

"And that 'cocoon' stuff," Starlight said, giving me a gentle squeeze. "That could be good. If that place you woke up was the fourth cocoon site, that means there's at least three more places where some changelings might have survived. Maybe more."

"Maybe less," I said, looking down at my hooves. "It was common practice with sensitive data to start numbering at something other than one."

"Anyway," Dusty said, "you were right. We found the server you told us about, but it's toast. What else should we look for?"

I looked up again, eyes glancing over the various desks. "...Anything referencing something called the 'cocoon protocol'. It seems likely that's the name for what the hive was doing with C.L.T.."

He went to one of the desks and started leafing through the papers. Starlight looked to me, worry in her eyes, but giving a soft smile. I managed to return it, and after giving me another squeeze, she moved to another desk to do the same. I remained sitting there for a couple more seconds before forcing myself to stand. Another flashlight lay beside Vigilance. I retrieved it, suppressing another tremble, and set

into another desk worth of papers.

Sickle grunted as she dropped another couple of bodies in the growing pile. She was panting just a little as she turned my way. "Shit. You've got one huge fucking family, you know that?"

Off to my side, Starlight was glaring daggers at her. As for myself, I wavered on exactly how to reply to that. Eventually, I sighed, and quietly murmured, "It's a lot smaller, now."

Sickle gave a single chuckle before going silent again. After a moment, she turned and resumed gathering bodies.

I wasn't surprised when our search turned up no more references to Cocoon. Information security was a serious concern, even in the hive itself.

The dead were all gathered by the time we had finished, with Sickle sitting back against the wall beside the pile. My throat tightened as I looked over them. There must have been forty or fifty changelings there. Vigilance lay along the side of the heap, her body twisted at an unnatural angle.

Dusty finished removing another respirator mask from one of the dead, adding it to the three he had already acquired. Another flashlight was given to Sickle, who dismissively tossed it into her bags. Then it was time for me to do my thing.

I focused my magic, and soon another funeral pyre was roaring, the green flames burning away the dead.

I silently led the way out, my pace lethargic. We were leaving the command center when Starlight spoke up. Her voice was quiet and surprisingly timid. "Whisper?"

I looked back over my shoulder. Her ears hung low as she tried to speak, starting and stopping several times before quietly asking, "What did you say the symptoms of, um... *over-feeding* were?"

My gaze fell to the floor again. "Fatigue. Headaches, dizziness, or disorientation. Magical exhaustion. Emotional suppression."

"Yeah," she said, slowly nodding. "Um... I think you might need to, you know... go easy on the magic."

I nodded dully.

Then Dusty added, "I'm kind of feeling it, too."

“Sorry,” I said. A moment later, his words fully processed. My head came up, turning to him. “Wait, you too? I wasn’t—”

I hesitated again. There was a small amount of affection—or perhaps compassion?—coming from him. “...I mean, I don’t *think* I was feeding on you, unless I did it without realizing it.”

“This place is fucking with our heads,” Sickie growled from my other side, and I looked over to see her flicking her tail in agitation. “Like the place ain’t right.” She glanced my way. “‘Cause yeah, I’m feeling it, too.”

I slowly nodded. “I’ll be careful. We’re pretty much done.”

Dusty nodded. “Where else are we going?”

Emotions warred inside me, but I spoke evenly. “Queen Ephema’s chambers. It’s the last place I can think of that’s likely to have any relevant information for us.”

Nopony said anything in reply, and we continued on. I led us silently back to the throne room, and then to the unbarricaded set of double doors. Broad stairs led us up to a wide landing, with another set of ornate double doors at the end.

The lock broke with a loud crack as Sickie bucked the doors open. We moved in, PipBuck light and flashlights illuminating the rooms as we went. The whole area had a sense of grandness to it; it was built to the scale of a changeling queen, and the hive had ensured that she had the most comfortable of living arrangements.

There was the grand entry chamber, ringed by a balcony above. A large office served as a workspace for both Queen Ephema and her assistants. Another huge room, larger even than her entry chamber, had numerous cushions and couches, with a few low tables. It was an ideal place to hold relaxed meetings. There was also a dining area, with a large table that could seat a few dozen changelings.

And then there were the more personal chambers, such as the sizable bathroom and, of course, her bedroom chamber. I had seen the more public portion of her chambers, but I had never been in these private areas. I had to force myself to continue walking. I felt like an intruder, a trespasser. It was a feeling both intimately familiar and alarmingly discomfoting. I was able to take some small comfort that

Ephema would surely not object to my intrusion. I was, after all, here to fulfil the mission she had entrusted in me.

I led the way through the rooms, my pace slow as I looked around. I could feel the tears slowly running down my cheeks, but I continued on, pretending they weren't there.

The bedroom was the hardest part. There were several displays to hold the small number of necklaces and other jewelry she owned, mostly gifts from changelings returning from missions in other lands. The shelves set on the back wall contained an assortment of artistic works that had been given to her. But mostly, my eyes lingered on the huge bed, long-vacant and lightly coated in dust.

I swallowed a few times as we moved back to the offices, and felt confident enough to speak by the time we got there. As we neared the largest desk, I raised a hoof to gesture. "Starlight?"

She moved forward quickly, stepping up behind the terminal atop the desk. It took less than a minute, which I spent in a fruitless search through the desk's single drawer, before the terminal flickered and whirled to life.

With the servers down, there was practically nothing to find. The local cache contained only a single file, a local copy of the last message the terminal had sent.

Thank you for your concern, Solace, but I must fly on my own power. My children are already sacrificing so much for their sisters and myself. We are being forced to leave far too many behind. It breaks my heart to know that, should the worst come to pass, I will never again see the many who remain here. Yet I am filled with pride for the bravery and resolve of all of my children, as they offer their own lives, with heads held high, to ensure a future for us.

I should do no less. I understand that the flight will be exhausting, but it is a small

price to ask me compared to the sacrifices others have made. More importantly, the skywagons can carry a dozen eggs in the space I would occupy. I will not leave a single one behind, even if I have to carry them myself. They deserve to see the future that their sisters' sacrifice has brought them. Please, load the skywagons, and send them on their way the moment the eggs are secure. Tell them I shall depart shortly, and don't let them wait for me. Have them fly without delay, and take the eggs to safety as swiftly as they can. I will be speaking to the hive in a few moments, to those who are remaining behind. Vigilance is worried about the security issues if this turns out to be a false alarm, but I can't leave without saying goodbye, expressing my shame in leaving, and offering my thanks for everything you have all given. Whatever the future of our hive may be, I hope we can live up to your example.

Thank you, Solace, for all you have done.

Goodbye.

I shakily raised a hoof, pressing the terminal's power switch. The screen flickered and died, the soft hum from within slowly winding down. I sniffled, blinking tears from my eyes. Starlight was beside me again, squeezing gently with a foreleg, her eyes watering up. It was several seconds before I was able to speak past the lump in my throat, my voice barely above a whisper. "...That's it, then."

"Sorry," Starlight quietly murmured beside me, and I gave a deep, shuddering sigh. I leaned against her.

"At least we know there were other sites," Dusty said. When I looked up at him, blinking away tears, he added, "There weren't any eggs."

I slowly nodded. "Yeah. There weren't."

Starlight gave another squeeze and a cautious smile, despite the thin trail of tears that had run down her cheeks..

Dusty stepped over, sitting on my other side. "So, hey, I know it isn't quite as neat and simple as if we had a map telling us right where to go, but... well, I'll be glad to help you look for them."

"Me too," Starlight said, full of determination.

Sickle merely grunted.

"Thanks," I murmured, then raised a hoof to wipe at my eyes. A few second later, I spoke again, a little more surely. "Though... I can at least make sure we don't leave empty-hooved."

I looked up to Dusty's questioning expression, and blinked away the last of the tears.

"I know where the armory is."



We stepped out through the giant blast door, the last funeral pyre rapidly burning down behind us. My head throbbed, and my magic reserves were nearly depleted. My body felt exhausted. I knew I shouldn't have felt so drained, but it didn't matter. Love starvation was no longer a concern with three ponies keeping me fed.

Then again, those three ponies looked as weary as I felt. The trip through the hive had been more draining than any of us had expected.

As I walked over to the control panel, Starlight walked beside me, her bags bulging. The muzzles of several weapons, both kinetic and magical, protruded from under the flaps. "You're sure about us taking all of this stuff?" she asked. She'd been hovering close to my side the whole time, watching me in concern. "I mean, I know that's a little stupid coming from the experienced scavenger, but... well, it's your hive."

I have to admit, it did feel a little wrong, like digging up a grave just to rob it of some trinkets. Despite that, I nodded. "Any changeling would give everything they had to help the hive. I think they'd be happy to know these went to finding their sisters, instead of just lying there, unused."

She slowly smiled and nodded. "That's a really nice way of looking

at it," she said.

I nodded a little, my mind slowly unwinding as I reached the door panel. She stepped up beside me. It was around then that I noticed her limp.

Starlight must have noticed my glance toward her leg. Given my downcast expression at the time, I suppose my concern must have been obvious. "It's just a little sore again," she said, giving a casual shrug for emphasis. "I'm more concerned about you, to be honest. How are you holding up?"

I stood silently for several seconds. The only response I could come up with was to shrug. Finally, I reached out, pressing the big red button.

A thump sounded from behind us, followed by a short screech as the giant door started to move once more. I looked over my shoulder, watching as the multi-ton slab of steel slowly rolled into place. The flickering green glow emanating from beyond steadily narrowed and faded.

I drew in a deep breath and let it out in a long, soft sigh. Then I spoke, my voice quiet and almost lost behind the grind of machinery. "The hive lives on in me."

The blast door shut with a deep thud, the muffled sounds of machinery winding down. I turned back to Starlight. Her expression was concerned again, until I smiled. It was a small, weak smile, as if it struggled against everything I had just experienced, but it held.

As she smiled back, I gave a little nod. I turned again, looking ahead as we started to walk.

"I've got a lot of work ahead of me."

ROM(1) LOADED

INSERT HOLOTAPE 2 OF 3 TO CONTINUE

